

The language of silence:  
speechlessness as a response to terror  
and trauma in contemporary fiction

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## **Abstract**

Following World War II the novel faced a crisis in its mode of address. How could the human and humane function of language and artistic representation be lent to the depiction of historical terror or trauma? Who has the right to speak on behalf of – or to assume the voice of – victims of such real atrocity? And to what extent can a writer attend to another's pain without aestheticising extreme vulnerability, or losing the reader to indifference or repulsion? The difficulties confronted by the writer of fictional works when addressing such issues as war, rape, domestic abuse, colonisation, slavery, even genocide are not rooted in an inadequacy of syntax; rather they are borne out of the disjunction between the idealistic assumptions that linked language to a sense of humanity, intelligence and the pursuit of goals beneficial to society as a whole, and the extremity of recent acts of human atrocity as conducted not by the savage Other but by modern societies with which the reader would otherwise identify. Since the mid-twentieth century a number of writers have responded to these challenges by forgoing the traditional dialogic form of the novel and electing characters that cannot or will not speak in order to convey, through their speechlessness and – at times – their damaged physicality, the extent of the violence and oppression to which they have been subjected, and the difficulty of assimilating such violence into the stories by which communities, indeed whole nations, define themselves. The unexpectedly large cast of mute characters suggests that silence has a vital role in the literary portrayal of historical trauma. The prevalence of silence in contemporary fiction related to the Holocaust, for example, shows how this group of writers recognises the extent to which this event tested and continues to test literary exploration. Writers the world over continue to refuse to ignore these subjects – indeed, the broken images and fragmented forms common to many of the novels studied in the following pages can be seen as an apt response to the chaos of war and human aggression – but, as is evident from the number of contemporary works of fiction incorporating a mute character, silence has become an accepted and effective tool for the portrayal of historical events of terror or trauma that continue to challenge the ethical boundaries of the imagination.

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## INTRODUCTION

All the mutes I had ever seen paraded by under my lids. There were not very many of them, and their absence of speech made them seem very much alike. The absurd twitching of their faces tried to substitute for the missing sound of their voices, while the frantic movement of their limbs took the place of their unforthcoming words. Other people always looked at them with suspicion; they appeared like strange creatures, shaking, grimacing, dribbling heavily down their chins. (Kosinski, *The Painted Bird* 141)

Within the dialogic form of the novel silence draws attention to itself. It is stubborn, self-conscious, often vexatious. Amidst the clamour of voices and the discursive clatter of self-expression, a character's speechlessness is an incomplete telling, a deficiency indicative of an event extraordinary enough, in the experience of the non-speaker at least, to resist traditional forms of disclosure, and fraught enough, in the view of the writer, to destabilise authorial responsibility for full explication.

While "traditional genres such as epic, myth and tragedy are dominated by the authoritarian voice of the author working at all costs to maintain a single voice, a single world-view" (Worthington 132), the contemporary novel tends to depend on a multitude of personal viewpoints in order to provide a more multifarious, and less unified portrayal of a specific event. If the novel is, as Georg Lukács says, based on the "autonomous life of interiority" (66), then reader access to that interiority tends to be by way of a range of subjective voices interacting with one another through conversation and dialogue as a primary means of self-expression. Silencing one such voice by way of a character that does not speak, therefore, raises fundamental questions in regards to what must lie beyond language, beyond effability – what act is so harrowing, what information so potentially dangerous, that its articulation need be so restricted? If language is "the deepest habit of our mind" (Hassan 17), then the deliberate withdrawal of language in literature is profound. Why would an author, the appointed "guardian and shaper of speech" (Steiner 53), choose to deny one character, the character with privileged access to knowledge or information, the ability to *tell*? Time and again we find the restriction of voice in contemporary literature used as a response to – and vehicle for – incidences of terror or trauma, be it rape, domestic abuse,

colonisation, slavery, war or genocide. The subject of this investigation is precisely those texts that, since the middle of the twentieth century, have included a character who does not speak, who relies not on direct articulation but on the physicality of the body to represent his or her story. In restraining the subjective voice of the victim of, or witness to, trauma these writers evoke the chaos of the experience of terror and dramatise the paucity of appropriate responses to extreme human aggression. In limiting the reader's access to such experiences they also allude to the risks inherent in the graphic depiction of historical trauma and the presumption implicit in assuming the voice of the victims of such trauma.

I began my research with two such voiceless characters – Friday in *Foe* by J. M. Coetzee (1987) and Norah in *Unless* by Carol Shields (2002). Five years later the sheer number of characters who do not speak in novels of terror or trauma – including the twenty-five figures in the texts studied here – suggests that the choice of a mute character is widely regarded as a valid solution to the challenges imposed by extreme atrocity to writers of literature, and as an indication of the caution with which these writers set out to translate historical trauma into literature. The prevalence of silence in contemporary fiction related to the Holocaust, for example, shows how such acts and events have challenged and continue to challenge the ability of the subjective voice to convey this reality without lapsing into cheap horror, overly graphic reportage, or a reassuring if completely unwarranted sense of conclusion (the experience of extreme terror offers no clear resolution, no point of completion that can suggest that such events no longer impinge on the present). It reveals too the extent to which the physicality of the damaged body has proved to be a more effective mouthpiece than voice in providing a judicious avoidance of repellent or inadequate explication, while also placing before the reader the unequivocal proof of a prolonged moment of terror. In their physicality these characters illustrate the burden borne by those who paid the price and who continue to pay the price of being privy to the human capacity for extreme violence within a society reluctant to hear or acknowledge such truths.

### **“What shall Cordelia do? Love and be silent”: a brief overview of silence in literature**

Speech is never far removed from silence. Within the context of religion, silence has long been regarded as playing a critical role in the relationship between a believer and a divine being alongside the vital creative power inherent in utterance. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition the divine act of articulation fills the silence of an unperceived and unformed world with a primitive, primary utterance that serves as the first organising principle:

[I]n the beginning . . . there is the description of a desert, or abyss, or formlessness or absence. It is the word of the creative god, which is not a dialogue because there is no one to talk to, that performs an organizing function, interrupting the chaotic continuum. (Schon 9)

If it is with the “Word, that all began” and that “all continues” (Neher 58), this transmission of divine sound is still regarded as having been born out of silence, be it the chaotic nothingness believed to have existed before the Word, “pre-logos”, or the soundless “phenomena of interiorization . . . a way of speaking without words” (59) that continues to be regarded by both western and eastern faiths as signifying a closer relationship between the mute devotee and a divine being than that usually experienced by religious followers. In Zen Buddhism, for example, meditative practices are prescribed for “convincing one, once and for all, that the use of words to reach truth or reality (dharma) is a futile and mind-breaking exercise” (Coward 118). Indeed, the Christian belief that both worship and ritual are heightened and made more efficient without the interference of words, with the understanding that the only true language with which to communicate with God is silence is, Silvia Montiglio argues in her investigation of the role of silence in ancient Greece, a Christian phenomenon derived in late antiquity from the “evergrowing influence of eastern practices” (10).

Even in what would appear to be one of the most spiritually moribund events of recent history, the Holocaust, the silence that defined the seeming vacuum of reason and the lack or failure of divine or worldly intervention was nevertheless scrutinized for evidence of signs of divinity. The writings of Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel bear witness to this desperate appeal to “reconcile Auschwitz with Judaism, to confront and perhaps wring meaning from the absurd, which emerges as the true antagonist in his fiction” (Knopp 214). Yet, in Wiesel’s texts it is the seeming absence of his God that is seen to determine His ongoing existence. As Michael says in *The Town Beyond the Wall* (1975), “to say, ‘What is God? . . .’ is to say that I have someone to talk to, someone to ask a direction of” (176). While Wiesel’s characters tend not to relinquish their faith in God in the face of what would seem to be compelling evidence of divine abandonment, the silences in his novels, as in other texts studied here, are obdurate in their answerlessness – it is a silence that carries no comfort, no meaning and no hope. Only unsubstantiated faith.

The dual perception of silence as both a sign of nullity or passivity and/or what Max Picard describes as a “fullness of silence” (“The fullness of silence would have exploded if it had not been able to flow out into speech” [24]) is evident throughout the history of literature. Montiglio’s study of silence in ancient Greek literature reveals a tradition of selectively mute characters in which silence for a woman represented a devastating lack of choice or a “prolonged and introverted muteness” capable of consuming her whole being and accelerating her death (233), while for men it suggested either stoicism or imminent madness. In the Greek heroic tradition silence was also equated with inevitable oblivion, as heroic status depended on adulation presented and re-presented through song, oratory and poetry – to be buried in silence was to be forgotten and thus denied immortality. Also apparent in this classical period is the enduring silence of the victim left incapable of naming his or her accuser though fear or physical inability (the ancient Greek word for an inadequate speaker was *aglossos*, literally tonguelessness), as seen in the mythological story of the rape of Philomela whose tongue was cut out so she could not name her attacker, the Thracian king Tereus. This theme was later revisited in what

is believed to be one of Shakespeare's earliest – and certainly one of his bloodiest – tragedies *Titus Andronicus* (c 1584 - early 1590s). As Marcus says in this play, as he encounters the brutalised Lavinia whose tongue has been cut out lest she name her attackers and whose hands have been severed lest she write their names:

But sure some Tereus hath deflowered thee,  
And, lest thou shouldst detect him, cut thy tongue.  
Ah, now thou turnest away thy face for shame! (II.V. Staunton 535)

This theme reappears in this investigation in the assault on Hanna X in *The Other Side of Silence* (2003), Ellen in *The World According to Garp* (1982) and Friday in *Foe*, all of whom have had their tongues cut out. As Susan Barton in the last novel says, on pondering the possible reason for someone maiming Friday in this way, “it was truly an unnatural crime, like chancing upon a stranger and slaying him for no other cause than to keep him from telling the world who slew him” (84).

Beyond the silence of worship or meditation, and beyond the forced silence resulting from such physical attacks, the association of silence with a culturally ordained submissiveness or passivity in women remained a steadfast trope in western literature well into the twentieth century, and again has been the subject of much critical attention. According to Harvey Rovine, the silence of William Shakespeare's female characters, for example, reveals not the imminent action suggested by the silence of his male characters, but rather “the character's lack of alternatives” (45) and a “passive or at times forced acceptance” (69). In Philip Bock's survey of the use of the words “silence”, “silent”, “speechless” and “tongue-tied” in Shakespeare's plays, the most common contexts for such uncommunicativeness lie in the category of “reticence, innocence and modesty”. This is evident in the opening scene of *King Lear*, when Cordelia says as an aside to her father's query regarding his daughters' love for him, “What shall Cordelia do? Love, and be silent” (I.I. Staunton 21). And in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Lucentio sees in Bianca's silence “Maids' mild behaviour and sobriety” (I. I. Staunton 351).

It was not until the advent of the western novel, with its strong emphasis on interior thought, that a number of writers sought to challenge this view of silence in women as indicative of passivity or a dullness of spirit. In the works of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Willa Cather, Virginia Woolf and Henry James the omissions, lacunae, pauses and general reticence once indicative of those disempowered by gender are often symptomatic of a silent strength, a chosen reserve in telling contrast to the banal chatter of society, as seen in Austen's *Mansfield Park*, written in 1814:

Fanny, who could not but listen, involuntarily shook her head, and Crawford was instantly by her side again, entreating to know her meaning; and as Edmund perceived, by his drawing in a chair, and sitting down close by her, that it was to be a very thorough attack, that looks and undertones



were to be well tried, he sank as quietly as possible into a corner, turned his back, and took up a newspaper, very sincerely wishing that dear little Fanny might be persuaded into explaining away that shake of the head to the satisfaction of her ardent lover. (310)

And later:

In spite of herself, [Fanny] could not help half a smile, but she said nothing. (311)

In her investigation into silence in the work of Austen, Bronte, and Woolf, Patricia Laurence argues that these three writers “narrate the inwardness of female listeners and observers in conventional frameworks in life and texts, inviting us to interpret their silences not as passivity, submission and oppression, but as an enlightened presence” (156). What once signified the victim of an unchallenged power structure became a non-verbal system of communication based on a subtle code of signs, bodily gestures, sighs and pauses. Such silences thus became another form of interaction, a socially acceptable form of metalinguistics that challenged notions of female powerlessness or vacuity while alluding to the social constraints by which educated women in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century class system of England were bound.<sup>1</sup>

The evolving role of silence in literature saw a dramatic shift following two world wars and the systematic genocide seen in the German invasion of Namibia and the Holocaust. The trench warfare and ranks of shell-shocked soldiers returning from the Front in World War I, and the death camps of the Nazi regime during World War II, challenged the traditional role of the novel as “the story of the soul that goes to find itself, that seeks adventures in order to be proved and tested by them” (Lukács 89). When applied to recent historical acts of atrocity, reader expectations of direct access into the experience of personal despair, pain and humiliation began to be perceived as a form of literary trespass – certainly for as long as survivors were still alive, and the barely mentioned questions relating to culpability and knowledge still circulated. The subsequent refusal to give voice, or full voice, to victims of violence became itself a form of evidence of the scale of emotional or physical pain experienced by the victims of – or witnesses to – such terror, and a commentary on the political or social structures that allowed such acts of barbarity to occur or to remain unchallenged.

The short-lived but explosive dada movement (c. 1916-1920) succeeded in giving form to the suspected collapse of the long-assumed bonds between art and truth, language and reality, in its denunciation of

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<sup>1</sup> Published in 1985, *The House of Spirits* by Isabel Allende challenges many of the views of stereotypical feminine reticence up to this point. Clara del Valle is determinedly non-Christian (our first introduction shows her swearing exuberantly during a Sunday sermon and consequently being expelled from church to Father Restrepo’s pronouncement that she is “possessed by the devil” [18]), yet her long episodes of silence are aligned with a heightened spirituality. Clara can levitate, move objects, interpret dreams, predict the future and commune with ghosts. While her fiancée, Esteban Trueba, believes her silence to typify feminine virtues, Clara herself rejects any notions of traditional feminine passivity.

conventional art forms, literary composition, and what one of the movement's instigators Hans Arp described as "the foolish rational explanation of the world" (Oesterreicher-Mollwo 8). Dada's use of new forms of abstraction, collage, photo-montage, automatism, chance and random selection signified this emerging change in sensibility as artists publicly rejected the confident assumptions of pre-war artistic representation and the codes of meaning that underpinned creative endeavour. Dada succeeded in exposing a silence, indicative of neither divine communion nor feminine power/passivity, within which the absurdist configurations of language were arbitrary, devoid of social currency, lacking in meaning, anarchic in their subjectlessness. Here was not an aesthetic withdrawal from the world but a reflection of chaos in which expectations of narrativity and causality were dramatically undermined. Dadaist art and writing replaced Picard's "fullness of speech" with a deliberate bereftness of communication: "a multiplication of language that asserts a wordless nothing" (Wolosky, "Samuel Beckett's Figural Evasions" 183-84). It was theatrical, symbolic – a dramatic unmaking of traditional systems of signification through the endorsement of aberrant meaning, non-meaning, and a consciousness "avid for the void" (Hassan 14). The dadaist movement represents a further step in the enduring discussion concerning the ability of language to point to truth (a discussion that may be seen to be based on an intellectual or philosophical as much as an ethical foundation). Certainly, in the wake of dadaism a number of writers, including Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett, used their work to question whether language could encapsulate reality, or whether words were simply set forth "in search of their meaning amongst a background of vast supposition" (Hopper 89), inevitably casting a shadow, in Platonic terms, on that which they were trying to reveal.

That the events of World War II should further challenge conventional literary forms is not surprising. In Michael André Bernstein's treatise on *The Cantos* of Ezra Pound, *The Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound and the Modern Verse Epic*, literature is discussed as a narrative of the cultural, historical and mythic heritage of its audience, providing models of conduct by which "its readers can regulate their lives and adjust their shared customs" (*Tale of the Tribe* 14). Just as the traditional epic poem presented the vital elements of the story of a particular community, passed down from generation to generation, the novel, too, could be seen to speak for peoples or whole nations. But when those in the position to narrate the story of their tribe (while nationhood embraces a much wider population than the blood ties suggested by the term "tribe", I have applied the term to any population that defines itself, and is defined by others, as an identifiable collective either politically, geographically or racially) have borne witness to the capacity of that community for extreme violence and cruelty – the very antithesis of significant communal values – then this social role of the novel proves problematic. In times of conflict or trauma, those models of conduct are reduced to acts of primitive struggle that threaten the coherence of a single narrative and put the creative exploration of such events at risk of emulating the dispassionate objectification that allows for such abuse. "The question," writes Frederick J. Hoffman, "is first if a violence of the mind to equal the force [of the brutality of modern wars] is at all possible. If it is, is the literature to be only rarely and resignedly descriptive . . . or will the imagination invent its own subtleties to meet

the demands of these new forms of outer violence?” (287). Certainly, a character that does not speak can be regarded as such a subtlety.

Much of war is unspeakable, writes James Knibb in his study on war literature, “though perhaps not unsayable” (7). The problem facing the novelist after World War II is not rooted in an inadequacy of syntax. War, as with rape, domestic abuse, colonisation, slavery, even genocide, is sayable – there is no shortage of dictionary terms to signify acts of gross inhumanity – but since the mid-twentieth century there has grown a scepticism about the power of language to communicate, connect or even signify – a scepticism born largely out of the failure of literature to fulfill its traditional role of providing edifying accounts of the indomitability of human strength or upholding Bernstein’s “models of conduct”. As Inga Clendinnen says in reference to Holocaust literature, “When those who will understand are dead or lost or scattered, why speak?” (37). In discussing the poetry of Paul Celan, Shira Wolosky states that, in some instances, silence will not serve as evidence of a failure of language. Rather it will be:

a language made dumb in the face of a meaning ultimately inaccessible, an event too terrible to declare or formulate, a despair of any significant order. Silence will not, that is, paradoxically assert penetration into a divine or ideal realm beyond utterance – it will instead mark the final unavailability of any reference point for orienting language and experience. (*Language and Mysticism* 234)

For writers of fiction the challenges involved in addressing events such as the Holocaust through “art” are significant. How attentive should a writer be in describing another’s pain, when such precision risks aestheticising the reality of extreme vulnerability? Who has the right to speak on behalf of – or to assume the voice of – victims of such atrocity? How can the writer attempt to elicit empathy without losing the reader to disgust or an unseemly voyeurism? How close can writers – and we as readers – go to personal trauma without losing our aversion to human cruelty in the face of what Susan Sontag in her analysis of visual representations of contemporary war and violence describes as a “terrible distinctness” (56) in the artistic portrayal of atrocity? When language, “the vessel of human grace and the prime carrier of civilization” (Steiner 132), is used to conduct, record and condone atrocities against fellow human beings, how can it then be used to restore stability, social well-being and enlightenment?

These questions have particular relevance to those writers of fiction attempting to negotiate the violence of the Holocaust. When pedantic descriptiveness carries the risk of generating apathy, indifference or a numbing over-exposure to suffering, and when a response equivalent to that of the victim – be it a howl of pain or a forgettable silence – negates the explanatory role of literature, the challenge to literary explorations of the

Holocaust, and the temptation to avoid such topics altogether, is substantial. As Gerrit-Jan Berendse and Mark Williams explain, since the revelation of Nazi horror:

language, however valued, has seemed somehow inadequate in the face of the manifest power of violence to degrade the human. The transformative power of art, an article of faith in post-Enlightenment thought, has seemed more and more fragile. Where terror has shown its power to transform reality into something resembling hell, how can language carry us to the heart of such experience? Is a tactful avoidance or silence not demanded? (16)

According to George Steiner, “The world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason. To speak of the unspeakable is to risk the survivance of language as creator and bearer of humane, rational truth” (146). This charge of unspeakability seems to be particularly relevant for those without the entitlement born out of personal experience. As Anne Michaels writes in her Holocaust narrative *Fugitive Pieces* (1997), “No act of violence is ever resolved when the one who can forgive can no longer speak, there is only silence” (161). Steiner suggests that the application of the norms of literary narrative – norms long reliant on dialogue to support plot and character depiction – to the reportage of extreme atrocity necessitates a very careful use of language. Even then, he says, only those people who had endured the atrocities of Belsen, Treblinka or Auschwitz have the right to put a voice to those events: “Those who were inside can find right speech, often allegorical, often a close neighbour to silence, for what they choose to say” (189). The last forty years has seen an influx of survivor memories and testimonies. Particularly over the past two decades, an increasing number of personal accounts have appeared, many marked by a stilted use of language, incomplete tellings or a chilling brevity – “subtleties” of language used to avoid Frederick Hoffman’s resigned descriptiveness and an inappropriate intrusion of aesthetics (let alone normality). But as fewer survivors are left to tell their stories, and as writers of fiction with no such personal experience of terror look to their art to explore human responses to real acts of war or trauma, the silent character emerges as a telling metonym, an ellipsis for events that must be seen to test traditional forms of narration while refusing to be forgotten with the demise of actual witnesses. The many unspeaking characters in the fictional works of Elie Wiesel, the near mute disabled Jew in Jakov Lind’s *Soul of Wood* (1964), the overwhelmingly inadequate speech amongst the prisoners en route to Buchenwald in Jorge Semprún’s *The Long Voyage* (2005) and the horrified silence of Jakob in *Fugitive Pieces* and the nameless boy in Jerzy Kosinski’s *The Painted Bird* (1970) – all, to some degree, sacrifice character to the suggestive power of their unspoken words. In their physicality these unspeaking or barely speaking figures signify the magnitude of what remains unsaid, of what still challenges contemporary sensibilities and communal understanding, as the “violence of the mind” that erupts into war, terror, rape and abuse is equated first and foremost with the scarred body as the irrevocable proof of crimes enacted upon another human being.

While the Holocaust may be regarded as one of the most extreme and defining examples of an event that challenges the scope of traditional literary representation, other acts such as rape, domestic violence, slavery, civil war and colonisation have also given rise to this trope of representation. The trauma of the abuse suffered by Sethe in *Beloved* by Toni Morrison (1988), and the experience of rape as inflicted on Lucy in *Disgrace* by Coetzee (1999), Mel in *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999), Ellen in Irving's *The World According to Garp* and Ritie in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1984) is revealed through curtailed speech, fractured stories, part tellings and silence. In fictional representations of civil strife and disempowerment resulting from colonisation and civil war there is again the recurring use of a silent victim or witness as irrevocable proof of acts of violence or hostility against fellow civilians, as seen in Seamus Deane's Ireland in *Reading in the Dark* (1996), André Brink's Namibia in *The Other Side of Silence* (2003), Michael Ondaatje's Sri Lanka in *Anil's Ghost* (2001), Jack Dann's evocation of the American Civil War in *The Silent* (2000), Joy Kogawa's wartime Canada in *Obasan* (1994) and Coetzee's fantasy setting in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (2000).

Some of these characters, such as Friday in *Foe*, Hanna X in *The Other Side of Silence* and Ellen in *The World According to Garp* have, as already mentioned, had their tongues cut out. Their muteness is total and irreversible. Others, such as Alec Marquand in *The Islands of Silence* by Martin Booth (2003) and Lakma in *Anil's Ghost*, have vowed to remain silent rather than give voice to the horrors they have witnessed. Others again, such as Billy Prior in Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy (*Regeneration*, 1992; *The Eye in the Door*, 1994; and *Ghost Road*, 1996) and Henry Armstrong in *Anthem* by Tim Binding (2004), are rendered mute for a short period of time in the immediate aftermath of trauma. Lastly there are those, such as the nameless figure in Semprún's *The Long Voyage* and Rachel in Sherri Szeman's *The Kommandant's Mistress* (2000), who circumscribe their accounts of terror in a conscious awareness of the risks involved in speaking out. In some of these texts, such as Michael Chabon's *The Final Solution: A Story of Detection* (2004) and Keri Hulme's *the bone people* (1983), the reader is given no access to the thoughts of the silent character; in others an interior monologue is maintained by the character who nevertheless remains divorced from the rest of his or her community through silence. All, however, succeed in conveying a degree of terror that shames the victim and witness – as much as it shocks the reader – in its indictment of the human capacity for inflicting pain or terror on others.

While the severity of such acts seems to be established at least in part by their position within or beyond the pale of language, this is not to ignore the dangers inherent in “privileging” certain acts of atrocity by placing them beyond the realm of effability. Such a tacit acceptance of unspeakability risks a disturbing hierarchy of suffering or piety, in which an historical event, such as the Holocaust, becomes an unshakeable absolute deemed to have universal significance against which later acts can be justified or compared. The refusal to speak can also be interpreted, as David Carroll explains in his Introduction to *Heidegger and “the jews”* by Jean-Francois

Lyotard (1988), as an accusation against those who have not borne such witness, or who have at least been spared the burden of the responsibility of the survivor. It can be argued, however, that the Holocaust informed the way that these other events have been represented in the novel over the last half century.

According to Bernstein, “There is no individual gesture of courage or lucidity with sufficient force to make whole all that has been crushed in the course of man’s development, or to make good all the thwarted hopes of history’s dispossessed” (*Tale of the Tribe* 271). Across the spectrum of nationality, race and gender encountered in these novels, the speechless characters represent the loss of literary confidence in interiority and appropriated voice, and in direct articulation as the primary vehicle for the representation of atrocity. In the failure of the humanising force of language, these characters challenge the belief in an increasingly humane society, while also indicating the pressures on the novel form exerted by such historic acts of pain and terror. Indeed, the sheer size of this cast of mute characters in contemporary narratives on violence suggests a widely shared uncertainty about the role of the author in the creative exploration of atrocity.

While the impact of World War II – and, in particular, the Holocaust – on language has been widely discussed, not least by Steiner, Clendinnen, Lawrence Langer, Berel Lang and Elaine Scarry, there has been little attention given to the literary use of silence over the subsequent fifty years of writing. During these decades the search for new writing strategies – strategies that “needed to register the inadequacy of all writing that has come before [World War II]” (Knibb 20) – coincided with the feeling that literature should, or at least certainly *could*, deal with such acts of historic terror or personal trauma. It is in negotiating this requirement in the light of the extreme barbarity of recent and more distant historical terror that silence has come to serve as a literary trope for dealing with accounts of gross inhumanity. Much critical attention has been given to the challenges presented to literature by the facts of the Holocaust and the responding use of silence by poets, novelists and writers of memoirs. In *Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction* Sara R. Horowitz examines specifically the role of muteness in the genre of Holocaust fiction. Within the fields of trauma studies and body politics scholars have explored the experiences of pain and trauma as read or witnessed by those without such first-hand experience. Yet the use of silence by way of a character that does not speak in contemporary accounts of terror reveals a widespread concern about the ethics of literary representation in relation to historical trauma. These ethical considerations have been addressed within specific fields: the Holocaust (Steiner, Clendinnen, Langer), World War I (Paul Fussell), postcolonialism (Graham Huggan), bodily pain (Elaine Scarry), rape and torture (Laura Tanner), photography (Sontag) and art (Hal Foster); and within the work of specific writers: Coetzee (Derek Attridge), Morrison (Yvonne Atkinson), Kogawa (King-Kok Cheung). Nevertheless, there has been little critical attention to the role of an unspeaking character as a response to the ethical challenges posed by historical trauma. In order to explain this phenomenon as more than a coincidental reoccurrence of unrelated mute characters I have focused in this investigation mainly on the commonalities between specific works of fiction that employ the

trope of silence, using critical texts in my exploration of these particular works and to support what appears to be a widespread response to the difficulties in portraying real pain within the body of recent literature.

Certainly, not all literary representations of war or abuse include a mute person, and it should be noted that this study focuses on those who stop speaking or who are stopped from speaking following acts of terror – it does not include those born with a physical disability that renders them incapable of speech. Nor does this study extend to the wordlessness that exists before speech, in the realm of the infant (*in-fans*, not speaking). And mute characters are not exclusive to texts on terror. What has become clear, however, is that, since the end of World War II, numerous writers have included in their narratives a mute character who has undergone terrifying ordeals and yet whose experiences are shown to resist complete access by the reader and/or other characters in the texts. These characters bear the physical and psychological evidence of society's inhumanity in solitary silence. As Marquand in *Islands of Silence* says:

I think I am one of those benighted souls, condemned to walk the earth until the moment of their last wheeze and stutter, carrying the burden of a million sins in the marrow of my bones and the corpuscles of my blood. For I have seen the iniquity of men and have partaken of it, have consumed the flesh and transgressions of another, drawing them into my body and am, therefore, damned.  
(225-26)

## 1

**“Ruinous Spaces”: domestic secrets and personal trauma**

And you’ll remember Erlene . . . that one person speaks,  
 another replies, another replies to that reply. There are words  
 to use, so many words. (Frame, *Scented Gardens for the  
 Blind* 170)

“Imagine,” says Catharine A. MacKinnon in her scrutiny of the legal status of pornography in the United States, “that for hundreds of years your most formative traumas, your daily suffering and pain, the abuse you live through, the terror you live with, are unspeakable – not the basis of literature” (3). In the following chapters I will look at the unspeakability of such terror in narratives of national conflict, war and genocide, but the experiences of domestic abuse and personal terror present a similar challenge to the literary representation of physical and/or psychological assault.

According to Elaine Scarry, “to bypass the voice is to bypass the bodily event, to bypass the patient, to bypass the person in pain” (7). Scarry’s study focuses on the assault on voice by acts of torture, acts that reduce a victim to the sub- or pre-human level of the body, but this elision of voice is also evident in those victims of, or witnesses to, acts of personal or domestic violence. In contemporary literature such victims are often slow in naming their attackers or the crimes inflicted by them – if they name them at all. This is not a failure of language; while to articulate pain, shame or shock is difficult, the words to describe the actions of their aggressors are available. Yet in silence, these children and adults reject the normal discursive interaction necessary for ongoing membership within their social group. In pain and/or shame, they withdraw from their community, just as Lavinia looks away in shame in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, so becoming trapped within the unresolved terror of the traumatic event itself. In Harriet Davidson’s analysis a speaker and a hearer are both necessary players for the act of witnessing to be performed – “indeed, each needs the other to hear or speak” (164). But if “witnessing and testifying are always, in literature as much as in the legal system, performative acts” (Davidson 165), then the employment of a non-speaking performer indicates a testimony that lies beyond such performance or discourse. For the act of witnessing to be successful, therefore, other techniques are needed to relay the event or events in question, to convey the horror of their characters’ experiences without forcing the reader to assume the repellant gaze of the attacker and without risking further violation of the victim by way of unfettered literary incursion into his or her experience. Flashbacks, hearsay, texts within texts, nuanced speech,



stuttered statements, metafiction and self-conscious allusions to the “general aesthetic of the spectacle” (Foster 91) – such techniques are all used to evoke the reality of human brutality without losing the reader to disgust, shame or an abhorrent titillation.

Central to this arsenal of literary techniques used in the representation of personal trauma is the mute character. Norah in Shields’s *Unless*, Simon in Hulme’s *the bone people*, Pallas in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* (1999), Melinda in Anderson’s *Speak*, Ritie in Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Lucy in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, Ellen and her cult of tongueless supporters in John Irving’s *The World According to Garp* – each of these characters evokes the horror of the violence done to them (or, in the case of the Ellen Jamesians, done to another) by refusing to articulate that violence. Through their silence their damaged presence reveals a level of barbarity that is defined by its very exclusion from the supposedly humane arena of traditional literary endeavour. As Laura Tanner says in discussing rape and torture in twentieth-century fiction, “to reveal rather than to obscure the suffering body, literary representations of violence must often work against themselves to subvert their own distancing conventions” (10). The use of a silent victim subverts the usual literary conventions (of voice, of interior incursion, of subjectivity), so insisting that the reader alone must bridge that distance between what is said in the narrative and what is implied or left vacant by the victim’s speechlessness. As a result, the reader is left with only shattered glimpses of the traumatic act – shattered by the various half-tellings of other characters, the fractured accounts of the victim, the guesswork of the reader and the destructive nature of the abusive act itself. Such fragmentary knowledge works to increase readers’ identification with the victim, not through detailed description but through an evocation of the “panicky awareness of vulnerability” (Tanner 43) experienced by the injured person. Left alone to interpret these oblique glimpses of terror within a vacuum of speech, the reader is offered a route to understanding other than that typified by the objective gaze of the perpetrator as suggested by the disengaged voice of the author. Such a route also offers the reader the opportunity to comprehend the experience of unspeakability itself – what Hal Foster in his treatise on avant-garde art calls the “ruinous spaces and fragmentary images” (86) that feature in some forms of postmodernist art. Such art, he argues, is allegorical not only in its stress on ephemerality but also in “its impulse to upset stylistic norms, to redefine conceptual categories, to challenge the modernist ideal of symbolic totality – in short, in its impulse to exploit the gap between signifier and signified” (86). In bypassing the literary reliance on dialogue and the voice of the subjective experience of trauma, these writers present a textual re-enactment of the frightening, irrational incoherence of violence through the “ruinous spaces” of incomplete speech.

### **“A bounteous feast”: the linguistic recluse**

Stanley Hopper argues that the presupposition of speech is silence: “[W]ithout silence, no utterance. If we do not listen into the silence our words become noise, linguistic clutter so characteristic of our contemporary world” (103). True presence, he says, lies outside the word/world of text. As such, it is perpetually deferred

“since we are always, unavoidably and intentionally, weaving and unweaving the syntax” (97). Yet in many of the works studied here this noise, this “linguistic clutter”, is instrumental in pointing to the impact of a sudden absence of sound or speech. Indeed, in a reversal of Hopper’s argument, we might say without speech, no silence. Certainly, a number of writers of fiction focusing on domestic trauma place voicelessness within a relentless clamour of conversation, argument, debate and verbal guesswork, as characters – and readers – struggle to translate unspoken trauma into the “normal” zone of verbal discourse.

In *Unless*, Shields traces the reaction of the Winters family – particularly the reaction of the mother, Reta Winters – to the seemingly inexplicable decision by Norah, Reta’s daughter, to spend her days sitting on a city sidewalk in mute mendicancy, the word “GOODNESS” written on a sign around her neck. Norah’s speechlessness is countered by the profusion of words within which Reta lives. As an editor, writer and translator she studies words and languages and luxuriates in the “gorgeous fluidity and expansion of phrase” (10) evident in the writings of her client, Danielle Westerman. Although we are alerted to Reta’s unhappiness in the first sentence of the book (“It happens that I am going through a period of great unhappiness and loss just now” [1]), Norah’s situation is not revealed until Reta has presented a seven-page list of her literary accomplishments. Even then, the Toronto street corner where Norah spends her days is given its own “textual archaeology” (8): it is where poet Ed Lewinski hanged himself in 1955, and it is where Margherita Tolles decided to write a new play. When Reta defines her daughter as a *wearth*, an outcast, she is not talking about a physical withdrawal – Norah is in the heart of a huge city – or even a social withdrawal. Instead she is referring to the utter withdrawal from, and within, society through linguistic reclusiveness: the complete and seemingly inexplicable denial of communication.

Here Shields alludes to the very early traditions of the outcast. In ancient Greece, those who suffered the punishment of ostracism were not left like the exile to wander through the wilderness – ostracism was in fact more “a prohibition of speech than a physical removal from the city” (Montiglio 16). Unlike those heroes whose memories would be preserved through the traditions of song and poetry, the act of ostracism not only denied the subject the opportunity to speak up and be heard, but also the chance to be remembered, as in silence they were left unsung, absent from history. Certainly, this is an apt description of those voiceless victims who, as a result of gender, race or experience of barbarity, are silenced either through their complete absence from texts or through their re-interpretation by a dominant group or culture.

Because Norah is given no voice by the author, she becomes what Kim Worthington describes as the mute subject “of other speakers’ interpretative will-to-power” (275). Her character, her past and the motivation for her silence are, until the last chapter, relayed only through the comments and guesswork of her parents, sisters and family friends. As Reta says, “What a guessing game we play with this child of ours. She has not had such intense parenting since she was an infant, but this time round all our efforts are based on conjecture” (174). Throughout this process Reta realises the ineffectiveness of her own attempts at an authorial interpretation of her

daughter's plight. She claims that her daughter "embodies invisibility and goodness" (8), yet this invisibility only increases as Reta and her friends continue to fill the void left by Norah's speechlessness with their own articulated thoughts, feelings, hopes and theories. "There is a bounteous feast going on, with music and richness and arabesques of language, but she has not been invited," thinks Reta (89) – yet this is a feast manufactured out of the incessant (and misguided, when it comes to understanding Norah's behaviour) conversations of Reta and her friends, the convoluted discourse between the characters of Reta's book and the profusion of dead and foreign languages. (Norah herself was once a student of modern languages.)

Within her protective layer of congested vocabulary and academic research, Reta uses language to situate her daughter's obviously disturbed state within the realm of socially acceptable normality: "Norah, the eldest, has her bedroom at the end of the hall (she is not home at the moment, hasn't been for months, in fact)" (33). The "Norah problem" is thus neatly sidestepped through the appropriate choice of phrase. Although she dismisses the "absurd notion that silence is wiser than words, inaction better than action" (41), she is confronted time and again by the failure or abdication of language in those around her. In her discussion of the figure of Cassandra in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, Montiglio notes that Cassandra's silence has shattered Clytemnestra's faith "in her superior understanding and ability to control her opponents by carefully contrived speech; she, the expert at ambiguous words . . . now loses the mastery of language and meaning. Clytemnestra wishes to believe that Cassandra is not grasping her words, when it is she who is not grasping Cassandra's silence" (214). In *Unless*, Reta's loquacious worry and exasperation over her daughter's silence is underpinned by her own unspoken fear that she may remain barred from an understanding of Norah's resolute and unequivocal speechlessness.

Sarah Gamble notes that earlier works by Carol Shields revolve "around points of rupture or silence: events or artefacts which cannot be encoded in language or be contained within conventional narrative patterns. There are points where Shields deliberately leaves blank spots within the text, indicative of experiences or concepts incapable of ever being contained within a conventional narrative framework" (45). In *Unless*, Reta's entire family is affected by the seemingly uncontainable silence, or blank spot, of Norah sitting on the pavement and the suddenly questionable status of articulation this action places on the rest of the novel's main characters. During the course of Norah's silence, Reta's mother-in-law, Lois, retreats further into silence. Her husband, Tom, "'enrols' into a silence that carries him further away" (43), Danielle Westerman, the Holocaust survivor and feminist intellectual whose writings Reta translates, refuses to describe the cause of her own childhood pain.

Discussing Irving's *The World According to Garp* as a postmodern novel, Raymond J. Wilson argues that, "[h]aving made ironic modernist realism's implicit claim to tell us about the world, the postmodern fictionist has questioned the writer's own instruments, and he or she thus often turns to examine it in the reader's presence" (59). In *Unless*, Shields, as with so many authors studied here, shows her concern with the limits of narrative; the experimentation in her texts tends to "push towards the point where the conventions of storytelling falter, and

language falls silent” (Gamble 41). The orderly world-view implicit in traditional narrative is reassuring but also limiting – at the very core of Reta’s hunger for articulation and explanation is the gnawing realisation that there are phenomena that lie outside the narrative framework. In writing on postmodernist literature, Ihab Hassan claims that the inner turmoils of man’s nature “defy all fictional forms and subvert the very statements he makes” (144), yet Reta embarks on an entirely convincing bid to avoid the recognition of such subversion, taking refuge instead in the familiar tropes of narrativisation and vociferous family life. Within the Winters’ domestic setting, normality, happiness and security are identified by the unthreatening sounds of breakfast conversations, friendly voices and TV talk shows. Norah’s silence in contrast appears to erode her family’s faith in the ability of such linguistic patter to communicate real distress. Eventually Reta herself comes to recognise the limits of the medium in which she works; she is not, she says, “unaware of the absurdity of believing one can learn goodness through the medium of print” (24). Yet, as she continues to search for answers to her daughter’s muteness in the “dead declarative syllables” of library books, book reviews, journals and internet sites (31), she is still incapable of empathising with her daughter’s quiet state of being without rifling through her society’s texts for an incisive explanation.

Shields thus explores the impact of an inexplicable muteness on a “normal”, “happy” family. She describes the theorisation, the self-analysis, the self-blame, the anger and the pain, yet each attempt to fill the seemingly unnatural silence – what she later describes as an “ellipsis of mourning” (206) – at the very core of family life ultimately fails. For Norah’s family, there exists only a horrifying lack of meaning in the young woman’s speechlessness: no logical explanation can be found to identify exactly what her silence signifies. Within the resulting lack of enlightenment, the Winters family edges around the subject of Norah’s silence. She is hibernating, her sister, Christine, suggests, as she bravely, sadly, tries to “keep the noise of the house alive” (106). She is undertaking a project of self-extinction, thinks Reta. “What terrible thing happened to her? There has to be a Thing,” her sister cries in desperation (142) as both she and Reta rail against what seems to be an exercise in self-annihilation. In his book on the limits of imagination in the portrayal of human experiences, Vincent Crapanzano argues that psychic traumas do not have a “specific referent, or facticity, despite the literalism of their replays” (91) and while the eventual illumination of the cause of Norah’s sudden speechlessness – her witnessing and attempts to prevent the sudden self-immolation of a young Muslim woman – does give some resolution to Reta’s despair, this explanation is, for Reta and for readers, overwhelmed by this other discovery: that verbalisation cannot satisfy completely our search for meaning, and that horrifying acts, such as self-immolation in this instance, do indeed contain an element of extremity that lies beyond rational explanation. Indeed, such perceived limits to explanation are in themselves evidence of a disturbing “beyondness” in the realm of human experience; in uncovering the traumatic event, “the Thing”, we are, says Crapanzano, missing “the traumatic dimension” of traumatic experience (91).

Narrative, says Gamble, is “inextricably dependent on language, a notoriously slippery medium of communication” (45). By focussing on the limits of language, Shields “indicates her fascination with the notion of using her narrative to convey the unsaid or (even more radically) the unsayable” (45). As Reta looks back over her own childhood, she unwittingly identifies the reason behind her search for truth within a deluge of wordiness: to name a perplexity, she says, “is to magnify it” (95). Yet, as she struggles to understand her daughter, we see her dawning appreciation of the limitations of speech and language in life as in art. “Why do children risk disclosure at all?” she asks herself. “It must be out of desperation or unsupportable fear” (95). She recalls an introduction she wrote for a book of poetry some years earlier: “Pretension is what I see now. The part about art transmuting the despair of life to the ‘merely frangible’ . . . what on earth did I mean? Too much Derrida might be the problem” (3). When Reta is finally ready to express her own grief, she does so silently, anonymously. During an evening meal at a restaurant she writes the words “My Heart is Broken” on a graffiti board in the women’s restroom, and “for the first time in weeks I was able to take a deep breath . . . . My mouth closed on the words and then I swallowed” (45). For Reta, her daughter’s pain – unexplained, unreferenced – is only realised once she has given voice to her own deep hurt, yet it is not the voice of the articulate and loquacious Reta Winters or the direct intervention of the author; it is an unspoken, anonymous voice, a textual aside that appears in a number of novels incorporating speechlessness and the oblique admission of pain. As Reta wrestles with her daughter’s abrogation from the communality of speech, she thus echoes Shields’s authorial approach to evoking a human dilemma. She writes, anticipating no reply, no specific reader, no dialogic convention of textual conversation. The pain of Norah, who is now only occasionally mentioned in half-finished sentences and vague allusions, is experienced only when the words begin to falter.

Psychoanalyst and Holocaust survivor Dori Laub alludes to the difficulty in registering massive trauma. Being witness to such events, he says, begins with someone:

who testifies to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence in spite of the overwhelming and compelling nature of the reality of its occurrence . . . the trauma as a known event and not simply as an overwhelming shock – has not been truly witnessed yet, not been taken cognizance of. The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to – and heard – is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the “knowing” of the event is given birth to. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time. (“Bearing Witness” 57)

In writing on the blackboard an unsigned and, unusually for Reta, concise expression of pain, Norah’s mother is acting as a witness to the witness of trauma, experiencing the trauma of this witnessing without experiencing or even being aware of the initial event itself. Using Laub’s analysis of the process of bearing witness to massive

trauma, Reta thus becomes akin to the listener to accounts of terror, a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event: “through his very listening, he comes to partially experience the trauma in himself. The relation of the victim to the event of the trauma, therefore, impacts on the relation of the listener to it, and the latter comes to feel the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels” (“Bearing Witness” 57/58). Such a response is certainly applicable to Reta’s painful response to her daughter’s emanation of pain, even though the traumatic event itself remains at this point a mystery. In this regard *Unless* is situated *before* Laub’s “emergence of the narrative”, in the slow days and weeks before “the ‘knowing’ of the event is given birth to” (57).

Norah’s silence, however, is also strangely liberating to those around her. The horror of the self-immolation, mentioned in passing in the fourth chapter (26-27), precipitates the young woman’s withdrawal from the accoutrements of modern-day, middle-class city life – possessions as well as speech. Confronted by the recognition of an inexplicable (and, at this stage, unidentifiable) event, other characters in this novel find themselves suddenly able to confess what had previously for them fallen outside acceptable articulation. Danielle Westerman reveals that her reluctance to discuss her childhood is a result of her mother’s attempt to strangle her; Reta’s aging mother-in-law explains her recent silence by the simple fact that no one had bothered to ask her what was wrong. If, as Worthington states, a character’s silence can equate to the empty space of any narrative which a reader can fill with his or her own writing, spaces that lie “beyond the directive of authorial control” (263), so Shields allows other characters to use Norah’s silence as an opportunity to fill the gaps in the otherwise predictable and secure narration of their own lives.

Janet Frame also explores the impact of inexplicable muteness on a family grappling for understanding or their own “authorial control” over another character (although it is not suggested that her mute character has been silenced as a result of terror or trauma, Frame’s use of speechlessness does echo many of the techniques used by other writers studied in this investigation). In *Scented Gardens for the Blind* (1963) the silence of Erlene stands at the very centre of the narrative, yet any promise of elucidation is thwarted at the end of the text when even she appears to be the figment of the imagination of sixty-year-old psychiatric inmate Vera Glace, mute for the past thirty years. In boycotting any expectation of eventual explanation in regard to the much-discussed silence of Erlene, Frame’s narrative “refuses the psychoanalysis of catharsis and the hermeneutics of the nameable secret. . . . secrecy in *Scented Gardens for the Blind* relates to that which in principle cannot be known, an internal incoherence that cannot be brought into harmony with the rest of a structure” (Lawn 108). Like Shields, Frame acknowledges the desire to uncover the cause of Erlene’s silence as the psychiatrist, Dr Clapper, and Erlene’s “parents”, Vera and Edward Glace, anticipate with varying degrees of sympathy and frustration the young woman’s return to speech, yet the language that absorbs Erlene’s musings and her inner conversations with Uncle Black-Beetle are as difficult to co-opt into a meaningful context as is her outward silence. While the Winters family is baffled by the apparent lack of meaning behind Norah’s speechlessness, Frame’s narrative

focuses on the lack of meaning inherent in language. In her mind Erlene recalls phrases, songs and pieces of poetry learned at school, yet these are recited without context or ulterior meaning. School monograms (“proof that you belong somewhere, to a whole mass of people running in races and marching to the band” [64]), dictionary words (Uncle Black-Beetle’s cousin is known to fall asleep on the page between *trinity* and *trional*), the names of South Island bays and Christian hymns are all presented as artefacts from a foreign past, devoid of literal or contextual meaning, pointing only to the borders of a semantic community to which you belong or not. When Erlene deliberates on the apparent importance of speech she is incapable of believing that her own words could ever succeed in reaching another’s ears and so be able to convey sense; rather her words would “beat themselves against the wall, and, failing to penetrate it, they would circle her skin and grow old and stale, and cluster like flies about her, and lay little white eggs upon her, as if she were dead” (174).

Just as many of the characters in *Unless* seem to slip into an atypical silence following Norah’s abandonment of speech, Vera considers the likelihood that her “husband”, Edward, may also fall victim to this epidemic of speechlessness. As silence spreads from person to person she imagines stumbling across:

heaps of decaying words – on the sides of the road, in gutters, in rubbish-dumps and litter-tins, for every home will have cast out words as useless, throwing them recklessly and thankfully away yet without thought for hygiene, forgetting the stench and diseases which arise from accumulations of decaying or dead words. (165)

The sheer thingness of words in this text – akin to the words cascading down on a small community in a shower of midnight rain in Frame’s 1988 novel *The Carpathians* – situates them as important or unimportant purely on the grounds of whether someone uses them or not, regardless of what such use or lack of use would actually mean. As Jennifer Lawn says in her analysis of this text, Frame’s texts “do not speak: they merely represent ‘what may not be spoken about’, . . . [Erlene] does not speak . . . because she can only express the impossibility of expression” (112). In regarding her previous, speaking life as mere “adjustments of silence” (180), Erlene now deems language to be part of a smothering, snow-like obfuscation of reality, “piling in great drifts, concealing tracks and roads and railway lines, cutting off communication . . . blocking the doors of speech” (180).

Lawn argues that such a complete silence reflects Frame’s own “literary institutionalization as a taboo-ridden figure buried under a flurry of hypotheses and interpretations” (113). Adding further weight to this “flurry of hypotheses”, I would argue that the anxiety surrounding Erlene’s silence as expressed by Vera, Edward and Dr Clapper is more reflective of an almost apocalyptic confrontation with meaninglessness – modern consciousness, as Jeanne Delbaere writes in her essay on this novel, “pushed to its last retrenchment at the furthest reach of language” (108) – prompted by a potentially transmittable lack of faith in the power of speech,

as opposed to the academic theorising that continues to bank up against the writings of this particular author. Vera's dread of silence infiltrating her entire world suggests an overwhelming fear of what may be left exposed (such as Reta's broken heart in *Unless*) as language use withers and dies. The nature of this potential discovery, however, remains unnamed as the author and the characters obstinately refuse the cathartic avenues of either psychoanalysis or confession. Neither language nor silence reveals this anticipated truth; instead the reader, like Vera and Erlene, is left with the sense of overwhelming dread of the traumatic event – a world without meaning, of complete irrationality. As Vera says, "I don't know how much longer I can bear the silence in [Erlene's] room. It seems to have spread like an influence, to the whole house, to the furniture which I love and never thought to speak to, yet now there are moments when I demand speech from it, not the occasional sharp snap-crack of wood bursting its bonds of space . . . but articulate language, the unique speech of furniture" (164-65). Her desperate yearning for "anything to drown the final silence of the human race" (166) reflects a reader's desire to see words reconnected to meaning, to restore the historic role of language and thus regain our belief in the orderly business of speech and writing. According to Erlene, "People dread silence because it is so transparent; like clear water, which reveals every obstacle – the used, the dead, the drowned – silence reveals the cast-off words and thoughts dropped in to obscure its clear stream" (68). As seen in this quotation alone, while Vera expresses her desire for her alter-ego Erlene to speak, Erlene's insistence on silence is revealed to the reader to be entirely reasonable. She considers speech on several occasions, but chooses repeatedly to safeguard her silence. In Derridean terms this can be interpreted as a bid to protect her individuality or singularity. In speaking, the figure of Erlene, as the product of the voiceless imaginary world of the psychotic Vera, would presumably disappear. Jacques Derrida argues that the first effect of language "involves depriving me of, of delivering me from, my singularity. By suspending my absolute singularity in speaking, I renounce at the same time my liberty and my responsibility. Once I speak I am never and no longer myself, alone and unique. It is a very strange contract – both paradoxical and terrifying – that binds infinite responsibility to silence and secrecy" (60). Certainly, the very existence of Erlene – alone, unique and singular as presented in all her fullness in this book – depends entirely on the ongoing inexpressibility of Vera's delusional imagination. Here again we see parallels with *Unless*. While the family's concern revolves around Norah, the central focus is not her – as a character she is not as fully formed as other members of the Winters family – but her silence. It is the absence of speech, and the resulting awareness of *something* inexplicable, that propels the narrative, that impacts on the family and that defines Norah to Shields's readers.

By the end of *Scented Gardens for the Blind* the reader has no indication as to what caused the thirty-year-old librarian, Vera Glace, to suddenly lose her voice (or her mind), yet the violence suggested by Erlene's – or Vera's – silence is a violence that takes as its target our most enduring faith in language and the "blasphemous" impulse of the psychoanalyst, or reader perhaps, who desires to put into words "something terribly powerful that is demeaned and reduced by being spoken" (Lawn 113). Indeed, as Lawn suggests, Erlene's body becomes



merely a physical symptom of her speechlessness: “The novel centres on the death, presumed murder, of Erlene’s speech. Erlene’s inert body, like that of a dead person, sits in a darkened, morgue-like room. . . . The remaining characters are brought together by the disturbance, this incoherent, speechless body which is presumed to know the circumstances of its own linguistic murder, yet will not tell” (114-15).

Just as Reta Winters initially seeks to return her daughter to the familiar world of speech and conversation as a reassuring if not necessarily enlightened sign of “normality”, so Erlene’s “father”, Edward, acknowledges that the words Erlene used to say are “irrelevant as long as she has been speaking” (83); now her loss of speech reminds him “how death, silence, the enemy, is trying to outwit me” (83). Vera, too, in her efforts to persuade Erlene to speak, begs her to remember how conversation is played out within the speaking world: “And you’ll remember Erlene . . . that one person speaks, another replies, another replies to that reply. There are words to use, so many words. Don’t you remember all the wonderful words in all the books upon your shelves – the shelves that Grandad made for you? Grandad would like you to speak” (170). Yet in her arguments, reminiscent of Norah’s absence from what her mother describes as a “bounteous feast” with its “richness and arabesques of language” (89), Vera refers only to the quantity of words, the volume of language and the physicality of books sitting on their homemade shelves – content, meaning and signification are ignored as the normality of spoken utterances, so vital for the reassuring appearance of functionality within a family or community, takes precedence over any real and meaningful communication. At the core of this abundance of suggested speech, says Lawn, Erlene sits “like a closed text, in silence and darkness” (113).

In Hulme’s *the bone people*, also discussed in the next chapter, the silence of young Simon, clearly a victim of physical and psychological abuse, is presented as an incomprehensible counter to Kerewin’s armory of rhymes, chatter, literary allusions and songs and Joe’s threats, promises and pleas in both English and Maori. As with the scenes of domestic violence described by Kerewin as love’s “silent partner” (204), Simon’s wordless rages are conducted in virtual silence, divorced from the everyday normalcy of conversation and set outside the traditional movement of character development. Like Norah, held in the sudden flash of the violence of self-immolation amidst a stream of people, language and verbose explanation, Simon remains caught in the moment of his trauma, operating as a static referent to the unnameable events that left him without voice. Using Foster’s analysis of postmodernist art, in his traumatised physicality Simon is “the evidentiary basis of important witnessings to truth, of necessary testimonials against power” (166) surrounded by – yet at odds with – the effusiveness of his community. If, as Hassan says, “Silence fills the extreme states of the mind – void, madness, outrage, ecstasy, mystic trance – when ordinary discourse ceases to carry the burden of meaning” (13), then Kerewin’s constant outpouring of linguistic defences operates as a meaningless and somewhat frantic safeguard against the perceived threat of such extreme states. Yet, despite her pseudo-scholarly chatter and verbal philosophising, Kerewin reiterates a Platonic understanding of the inadequacy of language: “One must name

cats, people, whoever, whatever comes close, even though they can carry their real names hidden inside them” (451) and she later chastises herself for never asking Simon what name he calls himself.

In *Self as Narrative* Worthington considers Thomas Docherty’s statement that “‘To give a proper name to an object, especially, perhaps, to a fictional character, is to distinguish that character-object from the rest of its environment . . . making the object, or character, occupy the position of subservient object’” (239). Worthington argues that such “separative” comprehension as is bestowed through the act of naming secures for the character-object not subservience but an individual identity, “one which is known and has value as individual precisely because of its comprehended distinction from another” (239). If personal identity is constituted “in an ongoing process of (self) narration” (Worthington 131), then, in being left outside the orderly structure of language on which the western humanist novel is based, the mute victim is to varying degrees excised from such acknowledged identity. In remaining only partly named (although he wears a sign suggesting his name is Simon Gallayley, he later uses stones on the beach to spell out what Kerewin believes could well be his real name, Clare), Simon, like so many other unnamed or renamed mute figures in this study, is deemed less distinct, less valuable as an individual than those named, and naming, individuals that populate his world. Demonstrating his powerlessness and the hidden nature of child abuse, Simon’s namelessness denies any reassuring testimony to his wholeness as an evolving character or to his forthcoming re-integration into communality; even his knowledge of his own name is incomplete: “He has called himself that, Clare, Claro, ever since he can remember. He doesn’t know if that’s his name, and he’s never told it to anyone. He has a feeling if he does, he’ll die. Stupid Clare, again and again, with each halt step. If he hadn’t thrown the plate, he wouldn’t have got the kicks” (119). To remain silent or incomprehensible, to abstain or suffer exile from membership in a signifying community, “is to relinquish or lose one’s power to negotiate revision or reinterpretation” (Worthington 274), yet for Simon it also impacts on the child’s sense of identity, suggesting a frailty, almost an ephemerality, that is both vulnerable to social incomprehension and antagonistic to the development of a complete, functional and interactive self.

Rather than illuminating his own narrative, Simon’s speechlessness serves to remind us of those boundaries of language largely determined by the parameters of what society deems to be acceptable discourse. While bestowed names such as Friday’s in Coetzee’s *Foe* typify imperialist assumptions in regards to colonised or enslaved peoples, having one’s own name recognised alongside those of other characters does indeed grant that character the autonomy of distinction. As long as Simon’s name remains incomplete or uncertain he falls short of the fullness of character enjoyed by other characters in the book. This state of semi-namelessness, permitted by his muteness, thus endorses his exclusion from the community in which he finds himself and his subsequent inaccessibility to the reader. According to Wilson, such resistance to full exploration of character, this “departure from the formal tenets of ‘realism,’ which center on an attempt to penetrate into the depths of character” (52), is a common device of the postmodern author. But in remaining psychologically inaccessible to

the reader, in remaining silent, incompletely named, and divorced from the other characters, this damaged boy fulfills more symbolic roles than those normally associated with postmodernism's distrust of character as subject. Just as the character of Norah in *Unless* is overwhelmed by the word "GOODNESS" written on the sign around her neck (a word that has, explains Reta, "emptied itself of vengeance, which has no voice at all" [207]) so in his resistance to full disclosure and development Simon becomes a representation of the victim of abuse, the traditionally romanticised figure of suffering – here marked by a history of heroin dealing, domestic abuse and family discord – and, ultimately, the sacrificial redeemer.

Throughout *the bone people* the presence of dialogue alludes to what is not spoken or conveyed. Following his brutal attack on Simon, Joe and Kerewin talk "as if through a glass wall" – words are shaped, viewed and offered but, "Nothing communicated" (121). Words are significant only in that they allow entry into one's community. Meaning or actual communication, as was seen in *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, is irrelevant. Within this welter of noise Simon remains like an island of isolation around which conversations stream. As Worthington says of the tongueless Friday in *Foe*, the speechless character remains in limbo, in a place "where bodies are their own signs, substantial but meaningless" (272). The mute character's silence is thus "a physical manifestation of his excommunication, his utter solipsistic isolation . . . [This character] remains unbound by the language (and hence the prescriptions) of others. He is free, yes, but the price of his freedom is that he remains wholly outside the dialogic community" (Worthington 260).

Just as Reta's urgent, loquacious investigations into Norah's behaviour lapse into quiet if despondent resignation, Kerewin too becomes increasingly aware that her attempts to narrativise Simon are doomed to failure. She initially uses her diary to record, to *create*, Simon's story through her own fantasies of "a linear, causal narrative of Simon's trauma, his healing and unproblematic growth into adulthood" (Najita 127). Such a process is doomed to failure and Kerewin's decision to burn her diary suggests her willingness "to part not only with the constructed, positivist narratives of history and psychoanalysis . . . but also with her desire for causal, linear trajectories" (Najita 127).

Yet Kerewin's initial focus on language, word puzzles, whakapapa (genealogy) and narrativisation leaves her fiercely resistant to other forms of non-verbal communication, in particular the idiom of physical touch frequently used by Simon in his initial, fruitless attempts at personal contact. Isolated within her protective tower of language, Kerewin clearly finds such attempts at physical contact unconscionable: "Touch is personal, fingers of love, feelers of blind eyes, tongues of those who cannot talk, . . . he knows perfectly well her reluctance to touch anybody's hands and is amused by it" (76).

As if to further undermine Kerewin's dependence on textualisation and excessive commentary (what she herself calls "garbage and gobbledygook" [71]), Hulme points to the potential danger implicit in the spoken word. In her anger over Simon's attack on her guitar, Kerewin uses words that are spontaneous, hurtful and ultimately nearly fatal. Her anger and her unthinking endorsement of Joe's planned punishment pave the way for

the vicious beating that puts Simon in hospital. In her essay on the role of literature in shaping cultural idioms and certain psychic structures, Gabriele Schwab argues that in this act Hulme “abandons any aesthetic distance”, joining those other authors who “undermine any protective distance, exposing their readers to the raw force of aesthetic desublimation” and in this case establishing “an extremely intense cathexis” with Simon (161). Certainly, Hulme’s description of Joe’s attack on Simon is shocking in its vivid portrayal, as it must be shocking, yet it exists too as a metonym for all those other acts of violence to which Simon has clearly been subjected but which remain unuttered. In this regard Hulme does not abandon all aesthetic distance – indeed she draws attention to aesthetic distance through her very transgression of such distance in this one instance and in Simon’s ongoing silence.

Joe’s act of violence by extension undermines any assumptions of language as indicative of civilised or humane behaviour. Through Kerewin’s apparent endorsement of Joe’s right to punish Simon we are reminded that the ability to talk, the one skill that the child lacks, is not only unconvincing as proof of reason or humanity; it is also dangerously connected to brutality and a reminder of the dominance of the speaker, the one who retains the power to signify “truth”, over the unspeaking character – a chilling reminder of the power of the adult, with his or her superior strength and language skills, over a child.

For Simon, release comes only in long screams of pain, noises “full of abject fear, of someone driven to the point where only terror and anguish exist. Nothing else, not even a memory” (234). The child’s suffering is redolent of the non-human and – in a literary sense – under-textualised character. Simon has no history – Kerewin’s research into his past is inconclusive, the inscription on his rosary “M. C. de V.” is only explained as the initials of his mother, Marie-Claire de Vraien court, in Hulme’s later short story “A Drift in Dream” (1986). The marks on his body are never explained, and Kerewin is warned by both Simon’s pompous Irish ancestor and Joe not to dig any further. Indeed, throughout the book, Kerewin’s desire to learn more of Simon’s history is presented as intrusive and unhelpful. The boy has no protective family or community; he cannot articulate his defiance or later describe his pain; he cannot even recite his own name. When he enters Kerewin’s life, he is defined primarily by his speechlessness, by the sign around his neck with the objectifying information: “SIMON P. GALLAYLEY CANNOT SPEAK”. Like so many other mute characters he is thus defined by an absence – he is denied textual wholeness and he remains marked by this denial throughout the book. He is initially perceived as almost non-human, described by Kerewin as “it” (14), “the brat” (17), “guttersnipe” (20). As Kerewin puts a sandal on his foot he hisses at her: “It, sssing through his closed teeth, bubbles of saliva spilling to his lips” (16) – a fearsome description of an animal-like response to perceived threat.

To be abject, writes Foster, “is to be repulsive, stuck, subject enough to feel this subjecthood at risk” (156). While Norah with her scorched, gloved hands (Norah burns her hands while trying to save the young Muslim woman), her bowed head and her begging bowl is, in the eyes of the middle-class society of her parents, simply “a sad case” (28), temporarily “shut out of the universe” (91), Simon constantly slips from the needy and

pitiable stereotype of the suffering child into an often repellant figure of traumatic truth as manifested by his damaged body and bizarre behaviour. Such insistence on Simon's unresolved abjection ensures that the reader's attention remains fixed on the horror of the boy's plight (unlike Norah who bows her head and gloves her hands in a more discreet emanation of despair). In an attempt to evoke the real, Foster writes, any sublimation of the dehumanising object-gaze must be rejected: "This is the primary realm of abject art, which is drawn to the broken boundaries of the violated body. . . . abjection is a condition in which subjecthood is troubled, 'where meaning collapses'; hence its attraction for avant-garde artists who want to disturb these orderings of subject and society alike" (152-53). Disturb, but not necessarily resolve. Just as Kerewin's full, at times overly concerned, control of her own subjecthood proves to be no indication of civilised humanity, so Simon is denied any "recovery" from his ongoing Otherness. While he succeeds in forgiving his abusers (he actually seeks them out in order to do so), in bringing both Kerewin and Joe to heed their own humanity, and in repairing the pain of their respective familial rifts, such healing is not shared by Simon himself: "By the novel's end, Simon's traumatic acting only *seems* to have ended – and his trauma supposedly to have healed – because he is too damaged to act out!" (Najita 123). Najita goes on to explain that "the desire for complete disclosure central to the western humanist subject can be fulfilled only through objectification and violence" (123), and certainly Kerewin's ardent investigation into Simon's past is disturbingly akin to Joe's violent frustration with the boy's apparent unco-operativeness. In Foster's terms, it is this ongoing resistance to entry into Simon's past that shows Hulme effectively refusing any sublimation of the dehumanising object-gaze that marks the boy from the beginning of this narrative.

### **"That dumb girl wouldn't even *talk*": writing rape**

In *Only Words*, MacKinnon describes a female plaintiff's painful revelations of sexual harassment as described to a U.S. court. As the plaintiff's voice quietened, as it dropped in tone, "We heard the spoken voice of a woman uttering the sounds of abuse, the moment in which silence breaks on the unspeakability of the experience" (65). In Morrison's *Paradise*, Anderson's *Speak* and Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* this moment of imminent articulation stands as a crucial moment of the plot. As in the court case described by MacKinnon, these revelations by Pallas, Melinda and Ritie respectively are undertaken with slow trepidation, tentative glimpses, repeated pauses and further silence.

In Scarry's exploration of torture and language, the loss of voice epitomises the destruction of self that results from intense pain. It is after this initial baptism into unutterable fear and pain that the threats of the abusers, the fear of an unwarranted sense of complicity with the perpetrator, the shattering of what appears to be a safe relationship and a protective community, and the fear of the consequences of unleashing such terrible truth on to one's community all conspire to render the victim physically, physiologically or psychologically silent.

In *Speak*, a book for young adult readers, fourteen-year-old Melinda Sordino is raped at her school's end-of-year party and later ostracised by friends and classmates for her subsequent phone call to the police. The story is narrated by Melinda, although it is not until half way through the book that she recounts the events of the evening during which she was raped. As a result of her social exclusion from her peer group, the continuing presence of the rapist at her school and the secret of the rape itself, Melinda falls further and further into truancy, declining school marks, and silence. In her reluctance to describe the events of the evening in question, the reader is presented first with the physical sensations of her speechlessness: "My throat squeezes shut, as if two hands of black fingernails are clamped on my windpipe" (28), and, "It is getting harder to talk. My throat is always sore, my lips raw. When I wake up in the morning my jaws are clenched so tight I have a headache" (50), and here again, "Every time I talk to my parents or a teacher I sputter and freeze. What is wrong with me? It's like I have some kind of spastic laryngitis" (50-51). Melinda's speech difficulties are a physical manifestation of her silence following her attack; indeed, much of the plot of the book focuses on her growing determination to name her attacker and his crime.

As if to accentuate the enormity of this as yet unachieved act of naming, Anderson places her central character in a community where the spoken word is becoming increasingly redundant. Unlike the excessive chatter surrounding Norah in *Unless* and Simon in *the bone people*, Melinda's parents communicate through notes left on the refrigerator, her teachers chastise their students through the silent act of writing their names on the blackboard, and the Spanish teacher speaks only in Spanish. Melinda's friends – or ex-friends – communicate through monosyllabic grunts, mouthed words, foreign languages or a kind of "eyebrow telegraph". When Melinda tells herself to, "Shut your trap, button your lip, can it" (9), she articulates the real reason for her increasing silence: "All that crap you hear on TV about communication and expressing your feelings is a lie. Nobody really wants to hear what you have to say" (9). Words that describe the truth are thus dangerous; their potential impact on Melinda's position within her social network and family is to be feared. Not only does Melinda think no one will believe her account of the rape, but she also lives in a society which appears to endorse a collective lack of interest in any pain or malfunction. Even Melinda's mother regards her daughter's silence as a foolish bid for attention. In the face of such widespread disregard, Melinda's speechlessness, writes Sally Smith, "is almost palpable. It stands between this adolescent girl and any useful, caring contact with those who inhabit her world of school and family. . . . The complicity of her social and school environments in her situation forces her to blame herself and detach from all that she has known and valued" (585).

As long as Melinda refuses to name her attacker this sense of self-blame remains intact. As Melinda recalls the night on which she was raped, she expresses her shame over her apparent acquiescence: when Andy asks, do you want to? she is stranded in disbelieving voicelessness: "What did he say? I didn't answer. I didn't know, I didn't speak" (135). And, as Andy pins her to the ground and violates her, "In my head, my voice is as clear as a bell: 'NO, I DON'T WANT TO!' But I can't spit it out" (135). Melinda's silence here is partly

surprise – she is young enough, naïve enough, to be initially thrilled by the attention of a handsome senior student, but when her schoolgirl romanticism is shattered by the forced sexual encounter, the words that demand to be “spat out” in disgust fail to come. Silent horror, inexpertly masked by a sassy, confident, teenage voice, is the only response available to her during this sudden transformation of adolescent excitement and infatuation into a frightening and painful sexual act, the antithesis of teenage romance yet consistent, writes Smith, with psychological accounts of adolescents “going underground”: “Melinda’s acerbic commentary on school, the behaviour of her former friends, and family dynamics, is used to confirm the young teenager’s mastery of a lucid and critical discourse, a discourse that helps her maintain her sanity in the face of overwhelming pressures. To the outside world, however, her only resistance is silence” (586).

Just as Shields allows the cause of Norah’s silence to emerge only after a protracted period of verbal guesswork and theories has failed to arrive at a valid explanation, so Anderson uses Melinda’s gagged speech to carefully negotiate the plot’s progress towards a description of the actual event. Too rushed or too explicit and such a description is at risk of alienating readers and rendering the act sensational. Too oblique or completely absent, and a real and dangerous act of violence is given the very invisibility desired by the violator. Yet, while the author clearly sympathises with the wounded Melinda, she suggests that silence is the wrong response to such trauma. Indeed, the plot can be described as an allegory of the importance of speech. When Melinda has to give a verbal report to the class on her suffragette project, she unveils a message on the blackboard demanding her right to stay silent. Not only does the school punish her for this refusal to speak, but her closest ally, David Petrakis, admonishes her actions: ““You can’t speak up for your right to be silent. That’s letting the bad guys win”” (159). Silence, implies Anderson, is acquiescence, so echoing the claim by Joseba Zulaika, in his essay on the crisis in witnessing in the contemporary world, that silence amounts to complicity “when injustice is not denounced” (95). Within such apparent complicity, the mute victim – as seen with Simon in *the bone people* – is effectively held within the traumatic event, incapable of bearing witness against his or her own subjugation and, as a result, suspended within the moment of its orchestration.

In this novel silence does eventually give way to communication as Melinda writes a note to her former friend Rachel identifying the rapist. Even though Rachel denies this truth, the act of naming begins Melinda’s recovery process. Finally it is through the relatively anonymous and voiceless medium of graffiti on the walls of the girls’ toilet that Melinda and other girls hurt by the same aggressor break the silence within which Andy Evans has been able to force himself on the girls at the school. In doing so, Melinda “has not only found her voice, but finds that she has released the voices of other girls also, enabling them to confront male predatory acts” (Smith 586). This anonymous act of reportage in a depersonalised yet safe female-only zone recalls Norah’s mother’s admission of pain in *Unless*, but while Reta’s concise message on the graffiti board in a restaurant bathroom expresses the simple emotional pain of the witness to the witness of an as-yet unidentified

trauma, Melinda's message breaks the silence surrounding the actual event, as well as the fear of disbelief and social censure.

It is telling that in the school cupboard converted by Melinda into a private sanctuary ("a quiet place that helps me holds these thoughts inside my head where no one can hear them" [Anderson 51]), she pins up a poster of her favourite writer, Maya Angelou. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, one of a series of autobiographical works by this writer, Angelou describes her rape by her mother's partner, the doomed Mr Freeman whom her uncles subsequently kill. Her frank account of the rape focuses not only on her years of silence following the revenge killing of Freeman, but also on the insurmountable burden of guilt and fear inflicted on the body of a child. In a child's world, Angelou suggests, such burdens are typically borne in silence. Describing her younger brother Bailey, Angelou asks, "How could an eight-year-old contain that much fear? He swallows and hides it behind his tonsils, he tightens his feet and closes the fear behind his toes, he contracts his buttocks and pushes it up behind the prostate gland" (57). As a child Maya (or Ritie as she was called) was accustomed to "tuning off or tuning out people" (41). Her gradual descent into silence following the rape is therefore deemed by the other characters to be within the bounds of her personal nature, as well as within the limited options available to a child swamped by fear and the dread of the power of utterance. Ritie is terrified that by even speaking aloud she will cause Mr Freeman to hurt her again or to carry out his threat to kill her brother if she reports the rape. As with Melinda, there is an initial assumption by the young victim that she was somehow complicit in the act of rape. She is unable to divorce the assault from earlier, less painful physical encounters with Freeman during which she did not protest: "What he did to me," she thinks, "and what I allowed, must have been very bad if already God let me hurt so much" (79). This sense of guilt is exacerbated by Ritie's belief that Freeman's later murder was caused by her complicit refusal to tell the court about their earlier encounters: "I could feel the evilness flowing through my body and waiting, pent up, to rush off my tongue if I tried to open my mouth. I clamped my teeth shut, I'd hold it in. If it escaped, wouldn't it flood the world and all innocent people?" (84).

Throughout this work speech is invariably the result of coercion and the cause of greater fear. The narrative begins with Ritie being forced to recite a text before a church congregation – she ends up fleeing in embarrassment as she fails to remember the words. Later she is forced to testify at the trial of her rapist, utterances she subsequently believes to have somehow caused Mr Freeman's death. It is at this moment that she decides to remain silent, as speech for her has become associated with violence, rape and murder: "The only thing I could do was stop talking to people other than Bailey. . . . Instinctively, or somehow, I knew . . . if I talked to anyone else that person might die too. Just my breath, carrying my words out, might poison people and they'd curl up and die like the black fat slugs that only pretended" (85). As Martin A. Danahay explains:

Angelou internalizes the violence of the rape and turns herself into the source of violence rather than its victim. In an embodiment of Rabesa's formulation that "discourse is violence", Angelou



fears that speech is an inherently aggressive act. Her speech has killed once, and could to it again. She now voluntarily assumes the silence that Mr. Freeman had imposed on her when he forbade her to reveal the rape to anyone else. She internalizes a hegemonic definition of women (even prepubescent girls) as sexual and therefore dangerous. Angelou had felt compelled to lie because the crowd in the court expected her to say that Mr. Freeman had not touched her before the rape. Having to lie about these events forces her to accept an image of herself as poisoned and made poisonous by her encounter with adult sexuality. (1991)

For Melinda in *Speak*, the main reason for not talking about her attack is to render the act undone: “[T]he whole point of not talking about it, of silencing the memory, is to make it go away. It won’t. I’ll need brain surgery to cut it out of my head” (Anderson 82). For Ritie, silence is a childish attempt to withdraw from the world of questions and unutterable answers. In order to do this she learns to “attach myself leechlike to sound. I began to listen to everything. I probably hoped that after I had heard all the sounds, really heard them and packed them down deep in my ears, the world would be quiet around me” (85). Like Melinda, Erlene and, to a certain extent, Simon, Ritie is derided for her silence. She is accused of being sullen and uppity, and later thrashed by “any relative who felt himself offended” (85). Unlike Anderson, who relies solely on Melinda’s fiercely subjective voice throughout her story, Angelou gives us access to the frustration that Ritie’s silence evokes in the other characters as they quickly, cruelly, denounce the girl and her behaviour.

Such treatment illustrates the extent to which the withdrawal of language precipitates a withdrawal from one’s social group – Reta describes Norah as having “no other place to stand after the ‘event’; she was all perch, she and her silent tongue and burnt hands” (207), while Erlene in Frame’s *Scented Gardens for the Blind* is regarded by her mother as “infuriatingly self-contained, as if there were never any need to speak, as if human speech were merely a bad habit, like war” (118). Yet such an accepted fall from communality also suggests what Robin Patric Clair, in his examination of silence in language and culture, describes as a “tacit knowledge”, a general “knowing without being able to articulate what we know” (6). In this situation, the silence of the abused suggests a socially endorsed decision not to look beyond the signifier (the silent, hurt body) to the signified (the rape itself) for fear of revealing an unwanted truth within one’s own community. Such a response implies an awareness of what may lie behind the silence, even a pre-emptive anger at the possibility of revealing the validity of this hidden truth, yet ensuring too that the obscuring pall of silence remains in place.

Unlike the meaningful lacunae of traditional feminine reticence, as seen in the female characters of Henry James or Jane Austen for example, this silence – the silence of fear, terror and physical assault – equates only with silence. Apart from the evidential body, which is itself unmarked by visible scars, the only obvious deviance relating to the act of rape is the author’s decision to render the victim voiceless. If the development of personhood within a narrative is “constituted and subdued by the violent authority of the word” (Worthington

199), then the experiences of these rape victims are devolved not through full authorial commentary but in a stilted manner that ensures the reader, like the other characters in the narrative, ventures towards his or her own understanding of the violence enacted upon the victim. It is thus the reader, and not the direct and unequivocal voice of the narrator, who is left to enter into the incoherence of the experience of rape.

Within these texts the physical presence of a hurt or damaged body, although saving the social group from the articulated details of abuse (which would necessitate the difficulty of response), evokes anger, frustration or dismissal amongst that same group. Scarry explains that, while it is an effort for the victim of pain *not* to grasp the reality of that pain, for other people it is difficult to understand, not least because those people retain “the astonishing freedom of denying its existence” (4). Yet even when suggested by bodily wounds or such symptoms as sudden muteness, “the aversiveness of the ‘it’ one apprehends will only be a shadowy fraction of the actual ‘it’” (4). The very unsharability of pain, accentuated by the difficulty of physical empathy and the communal aversion towards the evidence of human atrocity, inspires rejection.

The acknowledgement of shared trauma by a community, claims Jeffrey Alexander in his discussion on cultural trauma, is not simply the result of shared pain. Rather it is “the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity’s sense of its own identity. Collective actors decide to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they come from, and where they want to go” (10). As such, he says, social crises become cultural crises not through the intrinsic nature of the traumatic event itself but through a socially mediated process of attribution whereby “national histories are constructed around injuries that cry out for revenge” (8). Without – or before – this communal attribution of trauma, however, the individual victim (or, as will be discussed in the next chapter, the representative of a victimised group) finds no such acceptance or resonance in their community. Both the violated and the act of violation are denied the communal act of public acknowledgement or decision-making that would allow the account of rape to enter the realm of a cultural crisis with its associated expectations of sympathy, social outrage and redress. Such a rejection works in tandem with the inexpressibility of extreme pain that signifies the “absolute split between one’s sense of one’s own reality and the reality of other persons” (Scarry 4).

While in *Unless* Shields reveals the reasons for Norah’s action following a slow progression towards an exhausted silence on behalf of many of the other characters, in *The World According to Garp* Irving describes with almost farcical horror the extent to which the brutality of rape can be exploited by zealots – and writers and readers. In this narrative the Ellen Jamesians are a society of women who have deliberately had their tongues cut out as a protest against the brutal rape of eleven-year-old Ellen James who was similarly mutilated so that she would not be able to name her attackers. Garp, the central character, acknowledges that many of the women were justifiably trying to publicise rape – “what they meant was that they felt as if their tongues were gone. In a world of men, they felt as if they had been shut up forever” (505) – but his response to the women’s self-mutilation is unequivocal: “Although he felt deeply disturbed by what had happened to Ellen, he felt only disgust

at her grown-up, sour imitators whose habit was to present you with a card” (186). Even the original Ellen is opposed to these acts of self-mutilation. Using her notepad Ellen tells Garp “I *hate* the Ellen Jamesians . . . I would *never* do this to myself” (478). She goes on to write an essay entitled “Why I’m Not an Ellen Jamesian” in which she recounts the events of her rape: “[The essay] made what the Ellen Jamesians did seem like a shallow, wholly political imitation of a very private trauma. Ellen said that the Ellen Jamesians had only prolonged her anguish; they had made her into a very public casualty. Of course, Garp was susceptible to being moved by public casualties” (505).

In this example the entry or not of Ellen’s rape into Alexander’s notion of culturally established trauma becomes the subject of ongoing discourse between the characters. Ellen and Garp, to differing degrees, refuse to approve the public acknowledgement of the rape as enacted through the bizarre acts of commemoration enacted by the Ellen Jamesians, while the Ellen Jamesians absorb this one episode of sexual violation into the very basis of their communal identity.

Garp goes on to publicise his own response to rape in his controversial book entitled *The World According to Bensenhaver* in which he includes a detailed description of such “public casualties”. While Ellen believes this scandalously explicit work to be the “best rape story I have ever read” (476), many others, including the Ellen Jamesians, deplore the book. Their response to rape, Irving suggests, is a self-imposed (and extremely violent) silence, yet the apparent detail of Garp’s novel also illustrates the ethical dilemma underlying depictions of rape in literature as authors opt either for a socially acceptable circumvention of the details of the sexual assault (as limiting, perhaps, as the mute protest of the Ellen Jamesians) or an explicit, albeit truthful, account of such atrocity.

Like Shields, Irving is concerned with voice and the obstacles to, and of, narrativisation. Many characters in his novel are involved professionally in language yet remain stymied in their ability to express themselves. Garp is a writer often in the grip of writer’s block; Garp’s father had a speech impediment due to brain damage; Garp’s English teacher, Tinch, has a pronounced stutter, although he does manage to pass on to his students “a love of exact language” (95). Alice Fletcher, Garp’s lover, is herself a writer and suffers a speech impediment. The little girl that Garp finds in the park, the clear victim of a sexual attack, is unable to utter the words that could lead the police to find her attacker; apparently, says Garp, “her words were gone” (193). Although the young abuser is tracked down, he later escapes sentencing. As he tells Garp, “‘Nobody proved nothing . . . That dumb girl wouldn’t even *talk*’” (201). “Why is my life so full of people with impaired speech,” Garp asks himself, “or is it only because I’m a writer that I notice all the damaged voices around me?” (475).

Such impairments, says Wilson, act as a recurring motif that interacts with the counter-motif of writing (59). So we see Irving’s characters arguing over the wisdom of publishing both Garp’s *The World According to Bensenhaver* and Ellen’s autobiographical essay. In the end both do get published – the alternative, as represented by the mutilated mouths of the Ellen Jamesians, is an unnatural and highly conspicuous silence. Yet

the publication of these works, particularly of *The World According to Bensenhaver*, is itself fraught. Readers are scandalised by the explicit rape scenes. The decision by Garp's publisher, John Wolf, to release the *Bensenhaver* story is revealed to be based on the indeterminate response of his cleaning woman, Jillsy Sloper, who reads all the way to the final chapter in horrified fascination: "'If you hated it, why'd you read it, Jillsy?' John Wolf asked her. 'Same reason I read anythin' for,' Jillsy said. 'To find out what *happens*'" (424). Wolf struggles with the notion that an appallingly explicit text can engage readers simply for its cliffhanger element, and perhaps Irving shares this ambivalence as a writer – rape and other forms of violence are shocking but they do attract a reading public. This paradox of "disgust undercut by fascination, or of sympathy undercut by sadism" (Foster 222) revolves around the authorial approach to, and positioning of, subjecthood. Is it any wonder, asks Foster, that the postmodern subject – in this case the victim of rape – "is often dysfunctional, suspended between obscene proximity and spectacular separation" (222). In the face of factual accounts of war, murder and high-profile celebrity crimes "we have become wired to spectacular events. This wiring connects us and disconnects us simultaneously, renders us both psychotechnologically immediate to events and geopolitically remote from them [culminating in] a new level of oxymoronic pain-and-pleasure" (Foster 221-22) – in this case, Jillsy Sloper's pain-and-pleasure.

The role of the writer then, as deliberated by Reta Winters as well as by Garp and other characters in Irving's narrative, is fraught with possible inaccuracies and transgressions. As Reta writes her own book she wonders how much access she should give the reader to her central character, Alicia: "Does she speak her own story? In other words, is this to be a first person narrative? Yes" (135). Later she deliberates on why she made one of her characters a trombonist "if I knew nothing about trombones?" (176), and Alicia an employee of a fashion magazine when "I have no idea what the fashion-magazine workplace looks like or how magazine people interact" (178). In light of the lack of access given to Norah and, at that stage of the novel, the reason for her withdrawal from speech, this uncharacteristic uncertainty reveals Reta's sudden lack of faith in her role as a writer of fiction, just as Shields herself queries the ability of fiction to arrive at a valid explanation of acts of extreme violence. In *The World According to Garp*, Irving questions whether a writer of historical trauma merely slakes society's thirst for spectacular horror through explicit information. Can we deliberate on the very real terror of rape without fuelling such a thirst? Irving himself gives scant information on Ellen's rape; indeed, this act is visible solely through its contorted reflection in the violent self-harm of the Ellen Jamesians. But in the guise of Garp's *Bensenhaver* text-within-the-text, couched in the explicit debate concerning the rights or wrongs of publication, two rapes are described in detail. In the *Bensenhaver* novel, a deputy sheriff wonders if he should allow a curious passer-by to see the mutilated body of the rapist, Oren Rath, and "if it mattered or not, and to whom? Certainly, it couldn't matter to Rath. But to his unreal family? To the deputy? – *he didn't know*" (412). The deputy's prevarication could well represent the author's deliberation as to how much bodily detail to pass on to his or her "unreal family" – the reading public.

Throughout *The World According to Garp* Irving grapples with the role of the fictional and real life narrator in confronting “real life”. In the *Bensenhaver* work (with the same number of chapters and a very similar title to that of Irving’s book) Garp describes rape openly and explicitly, and, although we are told Ellen applauds this explicitness, Irving himself does not venture into the details of *her* rape as outlined in her essay. The very argument between Garp and his wife Helen over whether Ellen’s essay should be published can be read as an argument over whether Irving should be recounting the details of Ellen’s rape – he does not, but the undisclosed facts are ever-present in this book. While Garp argues that Ellen must not be regarded as a symbol for male violence against women, Irving suggests that the risk of objectifying the victim through narrative is no less a risk for an author than that taken by the Ellen Jamesians – they too, like any writer of rape, cannot help but regard the victim as symptomatic of all rape victims, even when this symbol speaks out in anger against the self-mutilating sect. Readers of *The World According to Garp* are invited to identify the worse of two options – the politicisation of Ellen’s rape by the pencil-toting Ellen Jamesians or the potential aestheticisation of rape through the disturbing imagery of fiction. While Garp himself grapples with this dilemma (and Ellen grows up to write neither prose fiction nor non-fiction but poetry), Irving has found a third option: revealing rape within a safety net of discussion, debate and denial. In terms of the avant-garde, such a technique allows the allegorical mode to disrupt the symbolic mode, while contesting “the general aesthetic of spectacle that reflected on such reification but did not challenge it” (Foster 91).

In *The World According to Garp* the eventual publication of Ellen’s essay is followed by the appearance of a book entitled *Confessions of an Ellen Jamesian*, later found to be a fake account written by the author of such books as *Confessions of a Porn King* and *Confessions of a Child Slave Trader* – imagination disguised as fact, fiction in the guise of non-fiction, a successful bastardisation of truth: “The popularity of this vulgar trash was enough to embarrass some Ellen Jamesians to death. There were, actually, suicides. ‘There are always suicides,’ Garp wrote, ‘among people who are unable to say what they mean’” (548). Yet, alongside the cynical aside about the tongueless Ellen Jamesians “unable to say what they mean”, the fraudulent narration of these later texts questions yet again the authority of the writer of fiction in addressing non-fictitious terror in terms of the ever-present threat of Foster’s “general aesthetic of spectacle”.

Throughout *The World According to Garp* the separation of life and art is never as easy as Garp would wish. After Garp’s death Helen and the critic A. J. Harms agree that his work “was progressively weakened by its closer and closer parallels to his personal history. . . . Garp had lost the freedom of *imagining* life truly, which he had so early promised himself” (490). Even while Garp himself insists that art should not imitate life, that “‘all the recollected traumas of our unmemorable lives’ . . . were suspicious models for fiction” (429), his own death is later described by his publisher as a “scene” that “only Garp could have written” (540).

In *Unless*, the pain of Reta, and the whole Winters family, is caused largely by their sense of powerlessness in explaining and thus resolving Norah’s obvious distress. As exposition fails in this aim, Reta is

driven to small acts of self-protection – in dusting and polishing her house, she says, “I’ll be able to seal it from damage. If I commit myself to its meticulous care, I will claim back my daughter Norah, gone to goodness” (41). In *Disgrace* Coetzee also dramatises the difficulty in negotiating the artistic or literary articulation of violence. Following the rape of his daughter Lucy, retired university professor David Lurie urges her to name the men who committed this act, so expressing that same parental desire to know, to understand and so to somehow solve their child’s pain. His entreaties, however, are driven largely by his desire to address his daughter’s – and not the rapists’ – sense of shame. As he thinks of Lucy’s three assailants, he imagines that, “They will read that they are being sought for robbery and assault and nothing else. It will dawn on them that over the body of the woman silence is being drawn like a blanket. *Too ashamed*, they will say to each other, *too ashamed to tell*, and they will chuckle luxuriously” (110). This sense of shame on behalf of the victim reappears in frequent accounts of rape testimonies. According to MacKinnon’s analysis of court cases in the United States, “Once you are used for sex you are sexualized. You lose your human status. You are sex, therefore unworthy of belief and impossible to violate. Your testimony that you were sexually abused proves your abuse, which defines you as sex, which makes it incredible and impossible that you were sexually abused” (67).

Unable to protect his daughter from such humiliation, or to exact revenge on the men who raped her, Lurie shares this sense of shame, almost to the exclusion of all other concerns for Lucy’s physical health or future safety. His fury, however, is undermined – or is it fuelled? – by his own actions when he abuses his position as a professor to force himself on a young student at the beginning of the narrative and by the prevarication of both father and daughter following Lucy’s rape. As a result, both father *and* daughter are burdened by the unmentionability of rape – Lurie for personal reasons (neither he nor his student Melanie Isaacs uses the word “rape” although clearly for Isaacs their first sexual encounter was not wanted) and Lucy for political reasons (she is a white woman raped by black men in post-apartheid South Africa). Just as Reta’s longing to know what tipped her daughter into muteness dominates Shields’s book, Lurie’s quest for information, for some pronouncement on what Lucy was forced to endure, dominates this text. Yet Lucy’s defiant refusal to speak up attests both to her own pragmatic decision not to speak out – she wants to continue living on her farm close to where Petrus, who claims to be related to one of her assailants, lives – and to a nation’s bid to bury, or pay for, the atrocities of the newly emancipated black South Africa. As she tries to explain to her father:

“What if . . . what if that is the price one has to pay for staying on? Perhaps that is how [the black South Africans who raped her] look at it; perhaps that is how I should look at it too. They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why should I be allowed to live here without paying? Perhaps that is what they tell themselves.” (159)

Lucy's determination not to discuss the rape – her only reference to the nature of her attack is in her statement regarding the need for medical tests and in her impersonal, and racially denigrating, comment to David: “‘I think they have done it before . . . I think they *do* rape’” (158) – reveals her acknowledgement of a social code that exists beyond the law. Just as Lurie refuses to sign a statement of guilt as prepared by the university disciplinary committee set up to investigate the charges of harassment laid against him, so Lucy resolutely finds a place to stand outside the official systems of law and redress (in her study of rape in *Disgrace* Lucy Valerie Graham notes that the names of the two raped women, Melanie and Lucy, echo those of the two mythological rape victims, Philomela from Ovid's *Metamorphosis* and Livy's Lucretia, so “highlighting Western artistic traditions in which rape has had a fraught relationship with articulation or representation” [439]).

In *Disgrace*, says Kimberly Segall, the traumatic sublime “is not a literal imprint, but a way of interrupting the protagonist's desire for a romantic self-image and obliteration of history. . . . *Disgrace* depicts Lucy's silence as a type of death, and shows how Lurie as the symbol of the writer seeks (and does not completely succeed) in resurrecting her lost voice” (2005). This correlation of silence with a “type of death”, while ignoring Lucy's recognition of her own silence as a decisive and powerful act, is a recurring parallel in fictions incorporating a mute character. In *Unless* Reta's awkward explanations as to Norah's whereabouts suggest a retreat from the living – her daughter “has been driven from the world by the suggestion that she is doomed to miniaturism,” she writes (165); like Erlene in *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, Norah is discussed in terms of what is missing, what is lost.

As a writer seeking to “resurrect” a lost voice, Coetzee reveals his political caution to be symptomatic of his position as a white South African commenting on the violence of black South Africans in a post-apartheid society. Yet Coetzee, like Irving, also questions the authority of the writer, through the ambivalent morality of Lurie, to reveal the nature of sexual violence. While Lucy's reluctance to speak has resonance in both political and sexual discourses, Lurie's desire to know the facts of his daughter's rape also raises questions concerning the rights of both writers and readers to enter the very scene of sexual crime.

The horror of rape is exacerbated by the fact that the victim's silence, and the subsequent lack of action by those around her, suggests a collusion between the victim and the perpetrator. While Lurie urges his daughter to name her attackers, his very language shares the same objective perspective presumably experienced by the perpetrators of the rape (as well as by the writer). “Lucy, my dearest, why don't you want to tell?” he says. “It was a crime. There is no shame in being the object of a crime. You did not choose to be the object. You are an innocent party” (111). Not only does Lucy's speechlessness on the subject support the notion of the victim as a powerless object, but it also denies Lurie and the reader the opportunity to share her experience. To the end Lurie is unaware of how his daughter's refusal to allow him to enter into her experience rescues him from becoming complicit in the objectifying gaze inherent in any insight into an act of violence by one person against

another. Coetzee thus manages to bring the reader, by way of the curious Lurie, to the subject (the rape of Lucy) without failing to remind us of the frightening possibility of objectifying the victim.

Tanner argues that in the act of rape the violator “not only assaults his victim but turns her presence into an absence that she may be unable to reclaim” (116). In denying the rape victim a voice, both Angelou and Coetzee enact this absence through the most obvious act of withdrawal available to a writer – that of disallowing direct speech. If rape is, as Tanner says, “an experience defined by the literal violation of the boundaries of anatomy and autonomy” (116), then the literary technique of silence on behalf of the rape victim avoids both these transgressions. As Danahay says, the act of writing a text as a means of breaking that silence “is inextricably bound up with the very forces it wishes to oppose. The idea of breaking a silence underscores the implicit violence in the act of writing”. Rape and its effects, he says, “make breaking the silence a dangerous and violent act” (1991).

Physical pain in general is monolithically consistent in its assault on language, “so the verbal strategies for overcoming that assault are very small in number” (Scarry 13). In *Unless* the eventual description of the self-immolation of the young woman is told in a mere four lines with minimal words and unemotive language: “a young Muslim woman (or so it would appear from her dress), in the month of April, in the year 2000, stepped forward on the pavement, poured gasoline over her veil and gown, and set herself alight” (209). The brevity here is in stark contrast to Norah’s prolonged silence and Reta’s book-length deliberations on the cause of her daughter’s actions, deliberations made all the more protracted because, as in many cases of rape, there is no weapon (aside from the body of the rapist) to act as a metonym for the crime. In her survey of the language used by patients, witnesses, physicians and lawyers in describing torture, Scarry concludes that pain “almost cannot be apprehended” without reference to a weapon or a wound (17), and images of weapons of torture have repeatedly elicited political outrage and empathy for the victim when used by such agencies as Amnesty International. With acts of rape, however, there is often no external weapon. While Lurie, for example, focuses on his memory of the kerosene tin and the matches (his daughter’s assailants try to ignite him), Lucy has no such focus. Neither Melinda in *Speak* nor Ritie in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* have recourse to a weapon, not even a visibly scarred body, to act as a metonym for the crimes enacted upon their bodies. The fact that the rape weapon is actually a body reduces the number of techniques or symbols available to represent the horror of the forced act. Lurie regards his daughter’s bed as the scene of the crime (although he notes that it has been quietly restored to order), while Ritie has to undergo a medical examination for internal proof of her rape. In both cases there is no possible weapon to represent and/or serve as proof of the attack, or to allow for the transfer of pain and degradation from the body to an artefact.



### **“Sounds crawled up my throat”: utterance and understanding**

In the final chapter of *Unless* we – and the Winters family – learn the reasons for Norah’s lapse into silence through the anonymous medium of a security video. As she lies in hospital with a severe bout of pneumonia, her return to speech coincides with the release of this new information related to the self-immolation. This return, however, is not marked by actual dialogue, as Reta explains:

“Norah,” I said again quickly. “You’re awake.”

Her mouth made the shape of a word: “Yes.” (204)

In making the shape of the affirmative word her return to speech is affirmed – we are later told that she is considering studying science or linguistics in the forthcoming academic year. In other texts, however, the return to speech is slow, painful and visceral. In *Speak*, the voice of the victim, Melinda, is that of a U.S. high school teenager – clever, defensive, brazen, flippant. Any overt evidence of depression or anguish that could be seen to warrant speechlessness is suggested only through casual allusions to chewed lips (an example of self-harm which is, writes Smith, congruent with research on adolescent girls under pressure), the school hideout and Melinda’s disturbing art works. Such emanations of pain and fear act as a barrier between the facts of personal violence and the orderly and humane processes of language. They invite us to focus on a tangible, socially acceptable metonym for what appears to lie beyond language, a narratological tool suggesting a degree of horror defined by its very distance from articulation. In the presence of her rapist such speechlessness is described as a protective act of camouflage. “Maybe he won’t notice me if I stand still,” she thinks. “That’s how rabbits survive; they freeze in the presence of predators” (96-97) and later she describes herself as a “Bunny Rabbit again, hiding in the open. I sit like I have an egg in my mouth. One move, one word, and the egg will shatter and blow up the world” (117). The eventual description of her rape through writing – and the lack of disbelief of those she tells – breaks the pattern of silence that had increasingly usurped her voice. Her final account of the truth – “Andy Evans raped me. When I was drunk and too young to know what was happening. It wasn’t my fault. He hurt me. It wasn’t my fault. And I’m not going to let it kill me. I can grow” (198) – is followed by a very tangible description of silence melting, the block of ice in her throat dissolving as the “words float up” (198). Through utterance she brings the act of her own rape into a manageable context. As one of the primary goals of psychoanalysis, such a release, says Albert Schon, is dependent on the mute patient’s ability to “find necessary words to promote the shift from the pre-verbal to the verbal” (7). By breaking her own silence, Melinda cuts through the prevarication and willing censorship of those who deny the proximity of violence within the small, seemingly close social network of both school and family – her final victory is accomplished through spoken words, not in notes left on the fridge, or through visual or performative art. As such, it is a

victory over a community's fear of addressing a harsh reality, and a re-establishment of Melinda's faith in the ability of words to carry truth. As long as Melinda uses silence to signify her pain and anger, her experience can be disregarded and her attacker left unchallenged. Speech is Melinda's final victory over Andy Evans and, more importantly, over her sense of disempowerment represented by her withdrawal from the social connectiveness, however eroded, that is marked by voice. Melinda finally comes to recognise that her pact of silence, while not an incomprehensible response to trauma, is not the powerful statement of the suffragette but the entrapment of prey, the fearful and ever silent "rabbit".

In Morrison's *Paradise*, the initial silence of Pallas draws little attention – she is just one of several wounded or damaged women seeking refuge in the Convent on the edge of Ruby, an all-black community born out of the exclusive shame of being shunned by other freed slaves. Pallas's temporary fear of utterance appears only in juxtaposition to the warm household conversations of the other women, and, earlier in the text, the "simultaneous yawns, the settling-in voices" of her mother, Divine Truelove, and Pallas's newfound boyfriend, Carlos. The intimacy of these sounds not only warns Pallas of their sexual relationship; it also serves as a contrast to the fearful silence that grips her as she hides from the group of suspected attackers in the black water of the lake after her romantic bond with Carlos is so suddenly destroyed. What happened before Pallas was forced to hide, or whether she was discovered by her attackers, is not explained. What is made tangible is the utter fear that consumes her while hiding in the lake and which later leaves her unable and unwilling to speak.

At the Convent, in her silence, Pallas is safe from the horror of her memory of this experience, cocooned in a child-like state of security and dependence so long as the truth does not spill out amongst those around her. In leaving unsaid the actual experience of Pallas at the hands of her hunters, Morrison colludes with the silence of her character. Just as Shields refuses to give voice to the experience that prompted Norah's withdrawal into silence, leaving the act of illumination to the anonymous screening of a security video, so Morrison reneges on the familiar reader-writer relationship and the assumed reliance on authorship to reveal all the facts.

Silence and the sounds of thwarted speech also serve to alienate Pallas from those around her: "This latest girl, with the splintered-glass eyes and a head thick with curly hair – who knew who or what she was?" thinks Gigi (170-71). Until Pallas speaks she is an object; the extent of her suffering and her need for human empathy are obscured by her initial inability to speak and by a presence defined purely in terms of her incommunicative physicality. Seneca, however, recognises in Pallas a pain "too far down" and, when Pallas does begin to recount her story to Consolata, it is a story "backward and punctured and incomplete" (173), mimicking the reader's incomplete understanding of the events leading to her arrival at the Convent.

As in other texts employing silence as a trope for terror, the emotional pain of the mute character in *Paradise* is reiterated by the physical pain of the unwilling voice: "[F]or sound making she couldn't rival the solitary windmill creaking in the field behind her" (173) and "Pallas touched her throat and made a sound like a key trying to turn in the wrong lock" (174). In *The Bonesetter's Daughter* by Amy Tan (2001), as the

protagonist's nursemaid Precious Auntie, rendered mute after a tragic suicide attempt, tries to name the murderer of both her father and her fiancée, she makes "a rasping sound as if the whole of her throat would slough off" (175). In Jerzy Kosinski's novel *The Painted Bird* (discussed in more detail in Chapter Four) the mute victim of abuse similarly records his painful attempts at articulation: "I opened my mouth and strained. Sounds crawled up my throat. Tense and concentrated I started to arrange them into syllables and words. I distinctly heard them jumping out of me one after another, like peas from a split pod" (234). As with Precious Auntie, Kosinski's nameless protagonist and Melinda ("my jaws are clenched so tight I have a headache" [50]), the metaphors used to describe Pallas's painful attempts at speech, and the animal-like sounds that take the place of words, suggest a terrible graunching of vocal cords against fear, panic and memory – an inhuman sound in shocking contrast to the rhythm and fluidity of articulate speech. "To witness the moment when pain causes a reversion to the pre-language of cries and groans," says Scarry, "is to witness the destruction of language" (6) and these descriptions of painfully constricted attempts at language, as pre-language sounds revert back to articulate voice, provide a highly visceral analogy for the earlier pain enacted upon the bodies of these victims. Pallas's tentative re-entry into speech is imbued with a very physical embodiment of fear: "She had opened her lips a tiny bit to say two words, and no black water had seeped in. The cold still shook her bones, but the dark water had receded. For now. At night, of course, it would return and she would be back in it – trying not to think what swam below her neck" (163).

Like Melinda, Pallas is able to speak for some time before she actually articulates the cause of her silence: "Her voice had returned but the words to say her shame clung like polyps in her throat, . . . she had not been able to whisper it in the darkness of a candlelit room" (179). Enunciation is thus only a tentative beginning to re-entry into communicative society, the first step of a process that that may eventually lead to a final description of the truth, just as Norah's shaping of the word "yes" suggests only a timid return to speech – a return that never actually promises a direct explanation of the facts behind her months of silence.

If, as Worthington suggests, readers of contemporary fiction are finding increasingly familiar the character who is "aware of her own precarious writtenness, of her dependence for meaning on the writing (and reading as writing) of the author and readers" (267), Morrison, in *Paradise* and in other novels, writes not as the author exposing the existential crisis of her characters to her readers. Rather, she sits alongside her character, endorsing her silence, leaving whole tracts of experience unspoken, ignoring the demands of the reader for illumination, just as Pallas ignores the gentle and not-so-gentle probing of the other women at the Convent. Such recalcitrance is in itself a highly political act. In her discussion of *Paradise*, Jill Jones notes that Morrison is all too aware that a large part of her literary heritage is the slave narrative in which "there is no mention of the [black narrator's] interior life" (2002). To assume this interiority through the use of voice, as opposed to acknowledging this interiority through silence, can be seen to be an act of cultural plunder or, at the very least, inaccurate reportage, endorsing the existing history of personal and social violation/invasion. As Segall says, a text's ability to violate

another by making identity assumptions, “is further complicated when traumatic experience is involved. Presumptions of knowing another person’s traumatic experience could be classified as part of this epistemic violation” (2005).

Real and unreal, argues Katrine Dalsgard in her essay on *Paradise*, all the women in this novel “inhabit a gap in other people’s narratives, though not in the way of filling it up and closing it. Rather, they once again function as a destabilizing supplement with no distinct identity of their own” (2001). Morrison’s narrative mode, she says, “assumes the patchwork quality that has come to be the hallmark of much contemporary African American women’s fiction. Open-ended, fragmented, and multivoiced, it works in the service of subjective and collective memory and against the notion of a totalizing master narrative” (2001). In *Paradise*, however, the very unspeakability of certain events underscores their importance. While Pallas is a relatively minor character, the very existence of Ruby stems from an utterance that is barely mentioned by the community. What has come to be called the “Disallowing” – the rejection of Ruby’s forefathers by a community of lighter-skinned ex-slaves – is the cause of a deep-seated shame that emerges as unreasonable pride, intransigence, incest and bouts of extreme violence; it was a humiliation that “did more than rankle; it threatened to crack open their bones” (95). Throughout the novel these “disbelievable words” are barely mentioned – like the founding phrase on the treasured Oven in the middle of the town, they become mere scratchings, a mythic endorsement of being, only vaguely remembered but used to support a self-narrative built on a terrible sense of exclusiveness amongst the people of Ruby.

### **“What terrible thing happened to her?”: re-fragmenting terror**

According to Linda Hutcheon, “Narrative is what translates knowing into telling, and it is precisely this translation that obsesses postmodern fiction” (*Poetics* 121). The authors studied here use strategies outside direct “telling” to re-enact, rather than describe, the sudden and chaotic dehumanisation of a body and thus to make us “know terror” through a more subtle, more visual form of “telling” devoid of obfuscating explanation or disturbingly vivid elucidation. One such strategy is the cinematic portrayal of fear. Norah sitting on the footpath, her head bent, her burned hands hidden in gloves, her one-word sign around her neck distilling all that she has witnessed and experienced into a single plea for communal redemption; Pallas hiding in the dark lake as her hunters try to track her down; Melinda getting tipsy at a school party; Ritie feeling the creeping hand of Mr Freeman; even David Lurie listening to the muffled sounds of his daughter’s rapists from the inside of the bathroom – each static image of terror reiterates the unresolved act of violence in belated, uneven, often half-guessed-at evocations of terror. Foster argues that the art of Andy Warhol not only reproduces traumatic effects, but also *produces* them by warding off traumatic significance and “opening out to it” (132). As such, the real cannot be represented, “it can only be repeated, indeed it *must* be repeated” (132). This compulsion to repeat, previously identified by both Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan in the recollection of traumatic events, does not

bring us closer to an actual experience or an understanding of such an event. Rather it “points to the real” in its very inability to provide a connection between “real” human experience and the image (132). Bypassing the explanatory testimony of the victim, entrenched in the communality of the cast of characters, these writers similarly recreate the effect of terror – that ongoing moment of incoherent and incomprehensible silence, fear, pain and panic. In the case of *Unless*, the reader and Norah’s family realise by the end of the book that they too have been held within that suspended moment of the failed rescue of a young woman from suicide. Norah’s silence is thus the unexplained, the vacated symbol of death in this instance at the hands of an unidentified Muslim woman on the streets of Toronto.

When the authors studied here are complicit in the character’s silence – either by suppressing completely the victim’s, or witness’s, account of the act of violence as in *Unless* and *Paradise*, or by portraying the event only to the extent and only at the pace dictated by the character, as in *Speak* – the responsibility for giving name to, or making sense of, the events of the book is transferred to the reader. It is the reader, Tanner argues, who is left to give form to the unspoken event. By limiting access to the act of abuse, the author thus places the reader “into a state of protected sensitivity” (20) that leads them closer to the experience only to be denied sensory access to it, and then, inevitably, abandoned to the power of his or her own imagination.

Even if the events of the trauma are eventually unmasked by other characters, or are revealed by way of another medium such as anonymous notes left on bathroom walls, the refusal by the author to override hearsay, guesswork, or the often chaotic images of the attack itself with a first person verbal account of the event can be seen as an attempt to avoid the emotional detachment that may result from a more orderly and detailed narrative description. “As the victim’s body disappears beneath the force of narrative abstraction,” writes Tanner, “or is rendered purely material through a focus on its mechanistic functions, narrative may implicitly endorse a vision of violence that divorces an act of violation from its human consequences” (8). Tanner’s argument concludes with a seemingly insurmountable problem – how to express in a narrative an event which has put the victim into a state of singular, suffering physicality, while at the same time trying to avoid the dispassion which would place the reader in the same objective stance as the violator?

Such dispassion or displacement of empathy that can occur in the orderly recounting of an episode of extreme violence is, for Tanner, accentuated by the very process of reading: “Because the dynamics of reading necessarily involve the reader’s distance from the fictional content of the novel, the reader maintains a coherence that counteracts the chaotic fragmented experience of the victim of violence” (37). It is the necessary coherence of the authorial voice that brings the reader to an almost untenable position – close to the violence, but made privy to the actions in a manner that, by its very nature, does not balk at the inhumanity of violence. While the body’s susceptibility to physical pain is the cornerstone of violence, it is the irrelevance of the physical body that marks the act of reading and which also, in terms of being able to regard the pain of others as a merely abstract notion, marks the experience of the person who inflicts pain: “However near the prisoner the torturer stands, the

distance between their physical realities is colossal, for the prisoner is in overwhelming physical pain while the torturer is utterly without pain” (Scarry 36).

The reader’s admission into the scene of violence, says Tanner, is an imaginative, non-physical entry, while the victim’s experience is defined by the subjugation of thought, intellect, even emotion to the overwhelming experience of a vulnerable body. In *Unless* Norah’s reaction is simple, minimal and unencumbered by the verbosity of Reta’s lengthy explanation and guesswork, so validating the inarguable lack of rational explanation that could soften or intellectualise the physical reality of burning flesh. Such conflicting positions between the victim and the reader/witness accentuate the difficulty for the author in his or her attempt to align the experience of the reader with that of the victim of violence: “The distance and detachment of a reader who must leave his or her body behind in order to enter imaginatively into the scene of violence makes it possible for representations of violence to obscure the material dynamics of bodily violation, erasing not only the victim’s body but his or her pain” (Tanner 9). Again this position can be aligned to that of the aggressor: “For the torturer, voice, world and self are hugely present. Body and pain are absent” (Scarry 46). While for the victim the experience is a complete reversal of this statement, the reader is as detached from the physical reality of pain as the aggressor.

In *Unless*, *Disgrace* and *Paradise*, however, this difficult position is largely avoided by the commentary of the other characters. While the vacuum presented by the mute victim allows the reader to objectify the victim in a stance similar to that of the perpetrator of the crime, the perpetual commentary that surrounds the victim or witness in these texts is vital in keeping the reader on a more humane and empathetic level. Reta in *Unless*, Lurie in *Disgrace* and the Convent women in *Paradise* – all serve to counter the trauma of pain or crime with their spoken guesswork, their exasperation, their articulated attempts to understand the experience of the victim. While language appears to be rendered inadequate to the task of speaking on behalf of human suffering, the apparent ignorance of the chatter surrounding the abuse invokes in scattered moments the desired state of human altruism in which such horrors could not occur. When Norah’s sister Christine cries out, “What terrible thing happened to her? There has to be a Thing” (Shields 142), she is searching for a reasonable and describable explanation that will, in its very articulation, remove the victim and the reader from the illogical and seemingly inhuman realm of suspected violence and so regain entry into her familiar world of western, middle-class comfort with its unthreatened if misplaced belief in an established system of meaning or consolation.

## 2

**“Dark geographies”: tribal wars and civil strife**

The Gurkhas in Malaya  
 cut the tongues of mules  
 so they were silent beasts of burden  
 in enemy territories  
 after such cruelty what could they speak of anyway  
 (from Ondaatje, “White Dwarfs” *Rat Jelly* 68)

In his treatise on *The Cantos* of Ezra Pound and the modern verse epic, Michael Bernstein explores Pound’s adoption of Rudyard Kipling’s phrase “the tale of the tribe.” According to Bernstein, this phrase refers to a collection of stories of a particular people or nation held within a culture by a chosen narrator – a writer, poet or musician – not as a form of entertainment or even moral instruction, but as a vital bonding mechanism that defines a particular tribe through the recitation of actions, examples and precepts that are recorded in order to guide and unite future generations:

Such a work is an artistic transcription of and meditation upon actions, and will, in turn become a stimulus to future deeds. The ideal relationship between history and the tale, therefore, is one of perfect interpenetration. As the experiences of the community give rise to a text, that text in turn becomes instrumental in shaping the world-view of succeeding ages, so that, in the words of the tale, past exempla and present needs find a continuous and unbroken meeting-ground. (*Tale of the Tribe* 9)

Such traditional tales articulate the cultural resonance of a nation through personal and social, contemporary and historical data that become locked in the memory of a nation or group as a form of tribal encyclopaedia. What happens, however, when that tribe is broken, fractured by internal events such as civil war or ethnic and political conflict which challenge the very coherence of that nation’s tale? What happens when the scale of horror implicit in this event necessitates, through the unspoken consensus of the splintered tribe, censorship, prevarication or silence?

Debate over the challenges to literary representation has long shadowed the depiction of the Holocaust (while the Holocaust was undeniably an act of national atrocity against fellow citizens, it will be studied in more detail in the final chapter). According to Steiner, the problem is not only that such horrors lie “outside the narrative syntax of human communication, in the explicit domain of the bestial” (189), but also that the ability – the right or the responsibility – to recount such events lies only with those who experienced them directly. Only they, Steiner says, can find “right speech” for what they choose to say (189). In times of civil strife – and in the focus by contemporary fiction on historic trauma – such assumptions concerning “right speech” become more problematic. As Kipling’s tribe is torn apart by colonisation, slavery or war – or the apportioning of the blame that comes after such events – who then should speak on behalf of, or against, that tribe? In their treatise on contemporary approaches to cultural trauma, Alexander and Ron Eyerman claim that such trauma is acknowledged by the collective when its members “feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (1), but when there is no uttered consensus as to a particular event, when a more powerful sector of the community refuses to acknowledge any stain on their collective memory, how difficult is it then for the voice of the witness to terror to be heard? It is true that events in themselves do not create collective trauma, and that traumatic status is attributed to real or imagined phenomena because these phenomena “are believed to have abruptly, and harmfully affected collective identity” (Alexander et al 8). But if traumatic status depends on the collective attribution of such a state to a particular event, how are we to address that experience if it is denied by one’s own collective? The questions put forward here in relation to the expression of national trauma can be posed in any situation of war or terror in which people turn against fellow human beings in an extreme repudiation of communality. Yet the transgression of the bonds of a community or tribe appears to pose more of a challenge than accounts of warfare between unrelated peoples. It is in the attempt to give voice to these situations that the mute character appears as a valid literary response to the broken or splintered tribe.

Discussing Holocaust writing, Langer argues that, by indulging in an act of textual aestheticism, a writer risks betraying the depth of trauma of the people involved. As he asks, “How should art – how *can* art – represent the inexpressibly inhuman suffering of the victims, without doing an injustice to that suffering? . . . There is something disagreeable, almost dishonorable, in the conversion of the suffering of the victims into works of art” (*Literary Imagination* 1). That the writers studied here choose to present a character that does not speak, so denying, to varying degrees, traditional expectations of character empathy and social belonging, is evidence not only of the difficulty of representing the trauma of others without trivialising or sensationalising that trauma but also of the recent trend in narrativisation towards identifying the limitations of such narrative, of drawing the reader’s attention to the fractures within the normal progression of literary representation that indicate traumatic experience. When the appropriation of pain through literature can itself be an act of further



violation of that pain, the careful distancing between victim, writer and reader by way of silence, and the refusal to assume the authority to speak on behalf of the victim, has come to epitomise the literary caution that is applied to the depiction of acts of violence amongst fellow civilians. Silence, in the form of an unspeaking character, serves as both an acknowledgement of the extent of repression to which these victims of, or witnesses to, civil strife were, or are, subjected, and as an opportunity to confront the initial trauma that was deemed to warrant such repression.

### **“Truly an unnatural crime” – the severed tongue**

Unlike the weeks of speechlessness of Pallas in *Paradise*, the months of silence of Norah in *Unless* and the years of silence of Simon in *the bone people*, for Friday in *Foe* by Coetzee muteness is total and irreversible – he has had his tongue cut out. In this rewriting of Daniel Defoe’s 1719 castaway story *Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, the mute character of Friday represents the story of black slavery (unlike Defoe’s Friday who is of creole or American ethnicity, Coetzee’s character is African). The main narrator, Susan Barton, finds herself stranded on an island inhabited only by the ever-silent Friday and the elderly Cruso, who claims that previous slaveowners were responsible for cutting out Friday’s tongue: “‘Perhaps the slavers, who are Moors, hold the tongue to be a delicacy,’ he says. ‘Or perhaps they grew weary of listening to Friday’s wails of grief, that went on day and night. Perhaps they wanted to prevent him ever telling his story: who he was, where his home lay, how it came about that he was taken. . . . How will we ever know the truth?’” (3). Barton does not disregard the possibility that Cruso himself cut out Friday’s tongue; either way, as we have seen, she regards it as “truly an unnatural crime, like chancing upon a stranger and slaying him for no other cause than to keep him from telling the world who slew him” (84).

Much of *Foe* is concerned with Barton’s experiences following her and Friday’s arrival in England (Cruso dies on the journey back from the island). She is determined to have the story of their unadventurous days on the island written by the esteemed writer Mr Foe (Daniel Defoe’s real name was Foe before he gentrified it with the prefix), yet her attempts are stymied both by Foe’s lack of interest and Friday’s silence. Foe refuses to tell their story because, without the full facts or a simulacrum of the facts (and for Foe either will do), he believes he does not have an audience. Indeed, the writer’s considerations go little further than the desires of a reading public eager for excitement, intrigue and maybe a little shock value. As he tells Barton, “‘The island lacks light and shade. It is too much the same throughout. It is like a loaf of bread. It will keep us alive, certainly, if we are starved of reading; but who will prefer it when there are tastier confections and pastries to be had?’” (117).

But without Friday’s ability to speak, who has the right to speak on his behalf? Firmly rooted in an earlier age of imperialism, Cruso fails to learn or tell the story of Friday through lack of interest – indeed, having kept no journal, having no plans for the future (even his terraced gardens remain unplanted) and having no desire to go back to his home country, Cruso has long disengaged himself from his own historic narrative. Barton fails to

tell Friday's story through a more liberal yet irresolute understanding of the issues of representation (Coetzee himself rarely gives voice to black Africans in his fiction, *Disgrace* being a notable exception). Wracked with a desire to provide a more enlightened narrative of the ex-slave's experiences, yet cognisant of the danger of assuming another's voice, she eventually admits defeat in the face of ignorance and her awareness of the unethical nature of literary invention, exaggeration or an outmoded racial ideology. She remains, however, all too aware of the unorthodox nature of this gap in her yet-to-be-written chronicle: "To tell my story and be silent of Friday's tongue is no better than offering a book for sale with pages in it quietly left empty. Yet the only tongue that can tell Friday's secret is the tongue he has lost" (67). And later, many stories, she says, can be told of Friday's tongue, "but the true story is buried within Friday who is mute. The true story will not be heard till by art we have found means of giving a voice to Friday" (118).

Such lack of access into Friday's story is made evident during what Barton believes to be an act of commemoration in which Friday drops buds and petals from a small handmade canoe over the site of a sunken ship containing, Foe surmises, the skeletons of his fellow slaves. In this ritual, Foe says, Friday "floats upon the very skin of death and is safe. . . . I should have said the eye, the eye of the story. Friday rows his log of wood across the dark pupil – or the dead socket – of an eye staring up at him from the floor of the sea. He rows across it and is safe. To us he leaves the task of descending into that eye" (141). Exacting what Worthington describes as "a masterly portrayal of tactical authorial withdrawal [full of] empty textual spaces and characterological silences" (252), Coetzee thus exposes the impossibility of Barton as the postcolonial liberal, Foe as the writer of fiction, and himself as a contemporary author to descend into that eye and retrieve the voice of the enslaved African.

Yet, while Barton laments Friday's inability to tell his story (or her own inability to hear it), she also admits that Friday's silence is not without its benefits to the dominant – writing and speaking – culture. She tells Foe that, in her dealings with Friday, "There are times benevolence deserts me and I use words only as the shortest way to subject him to my will. At such times I understand why Crusoe preferred not to disturb his muteness" (60) – an acknowledgement of the enduring temptation to revert to older forms of narration as typified by Defoe's assumptions of the unbreachable division between white masters and their black slaves. Even her attempts to teach Friday "the names of things" (57) tend to slip into an incurious demand for reiteration in order that Friday may do her bidding:

How I wish there were a garden I could take him to! Could he and I not visit your garden in Stoke Newington? We should be as quiet as ghosts. "Spade, Friday!" I should whisper, offering the spade to his hand; and then, "Dig!" – which is a word his master taught him – "Turn over the soil, pile up the weeds for burning. Feel the spade. Is it not a fine, sharp tool? It is an English spade, made in an English smithy . . ." (39)

As a constant element at the heart of Coetzee's fiction, silence is, says Julian Gitzen, "a presence that mocks the more inquisitive of his protagonists" (4), and to be sure we as readers share the frustration of Barton, just as we do with Lurie in *Disgrace*, of being denied full access – and of being reminded of such inaccessibility – to a truth that is inextricably bound up in the political and cultural history of a particular group or ethnicity to which the narrator does not belong. Sited within western literature, such silences continue to inspire debate on the role of narrative in its role of cross-cultural reportage and whether the telling of another's story is in itself a further act of plunder:

The production of any narrative, fictional or critical, depends upon the creation of a certain textual logic – the creation of an essentially fictional discourse – which performs the task of privileging certain subjects over others. *Foe's* narrative strategy points out that the translation of events "out of hand" into their situation within a master(ing) narrative involves a violence analogous to that of colonization. . . . This violation become evident, ironically, when the narrative fails to master its subjects: when it "loses its voice." (Jolly 3)

This failure of mastery is integral to *Foe*. Whoever was responsible for Friday's tonguelessness – be it Cruso, a previous slaveowner or the canon of western writing itself – his story remains the subject of guesswork throughout the novel. Coetzee thus presents his argument: how can one culture ever understand or attempt to describe the violent experiences done in its name upon another? In exploring the capacity of western narration in its ability to address the brutality of slavery and colonialism, *Foe* distances itself from the very norms of such narration in order to avoid the "unnatural crime" of analysing cultural domination through the literature of the dominant culture.

Barton's pressure on Foe to tell – or make up – Friday's story is rooted in her belief that Foe's skills are required to make her own story whole; as she begs the author, "Return to me the substance I have lost, Mr Foe: that is my entreaty" (51). This trust in writtenness, as Attridge says, suggests that human experience "seems lacking in substance and significance if it is not represented (to oneself and to others) in culturally validated narrative forms" (80). Hence Barton's insistence on being translated into narrative, as if it is then and only then that her existence can be authenticated. Edmond Jabès addresses this dependency on the written word to make real or legitimise the very act of being. It is the word, he argues, whether that of a god or a social group, that makes real: "If god is, it is because He is in the book. If sages, saints, and prophets exist, if scholars and poets, men and insects exist, it is because their names are found in the book. The world exists because the book does. For existing means growing with your name" (31). Those who remain voiceless – the colonised, the conquered, the abused and the condemned – are voiceless because their names do not appear in "the book", Bernstein's

“tribal encyclopaedia”, collated by the dominant culture at the expense of those voices left in silence. As Attridge says, “All canons rest on exclusion; the voice they give to some can be heard only by virtue of the silence they impose on others” (82).

Such is Barton’s desire for inclusion in “the book” that she is frequently tempted to fabricate, exaggerate or simply guess the elements of her and Friday’s “story”. She considers adding a few cannibals to her story to arouse Foe’s interest – an authorial reflection on the liberties taken by Defoe in his exaggerated version of the real experiences of Alexander Selkirk, an eighteenth-century Scottish sailor who survived for five years on an uninhabited island in the Chilean Sea. While such attempts clearly fail – neither Coetzee, Foe nor the contemporary reader is expected to countenance transparent falsehoods – the paradox lies in Coetzee’s very attempt to bring Friday into our imagination. If, as Attridge says, all canons rely on exclusion, then Friday’s voice has clearly been excluded by the processes of colonialism that spawned three hundred years of trans-Atlantic slavery, by the tradition of colonial fiction-writing, and, perhaps, by liberal, postcolonial interrogations, all of which are imbued with the silence of Friday. Coetzee’s narrative deliberately provides no easy resolution to this challenge to postcolonial western culture but neither does it allow such a story to lapse completely from literary discourse.

Foster argues that the cultural Other, confronted in the course of empire, provoked a “crisis in Western identity” (217). Repressed through modernism’s “fetishistic recognition-and-disavowal of this otherness,” he says, we are now seeing a return of this unbreachable alienation – indeed this return has become “the postmodern event” (217). Distanced from every character in this book and remote from every reader of this book, Friday epitomises this return of the Other. Silent, inaccessible, yet inarguably present, he forces the viewer – through Barton – to recognise repression even as Barton seeks new ways to “construct” Friday in relation to her own history. Hutcheon observes this reluctance in postmodern representation to translate history into a cohesive present: “In both historiographic theory and postmodern fiction, there is an intense self-consciousness (both theoretical and textual) about the act of narrating in the present the events of the past” (*Politics of Postmodernism* 71). Certainly in *Foe*, Coetzee draws repeated attention to what he as the author refuses to say or even speculate upon. This self-conscious reticence is evident in the final paragraphs of the novel when the unidentified narrator feels the full, slow, uninterrupted stream of Friday’s final breath in a purely sensory encounter with a form of speech that remains inaccessible to writers and readers from a presumably opposing – and historically dominant – culture: “From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me, it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth” (157). As the narrator says, “This is not a place of words. Each syllable, as it comes out, is caught and filled with water and diffused. This is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday” (157). The gushing omnipresence of Friday’s “signs” lies beyond the limits of western discourse, and it is the recognition of these limits, defined here by the

boundaries of language, that marks *Foe* as an exploration of the yet-to-be-resolved right to speech. As Attridge says, the narrator in this final section “has made the last of many attempts to get Friday to speak, and the hauntingly allusive description of the soundless stream issuing from his body – akin to the ‘wordless mouth music’ . . . of Simon in Keri Hulme’s *the bone people* – is a culmination of the book’s concern with the powerful silence which is the price of our own cultural achievements” (67). This last section in *Foe*, he says, is representative of “a speechless speech endlessly covering the world” (67) and, as such, is not a complete abdication of speech. Rather than leaving the reader with an assumption of unredeemable unknowability, Coetzee concludes his narrative with an illustration of incomprehensibility – prone to misinterpretation and misappropriation undoubtedly but also acknowledging the existence of another language, another consciousness and another set of experiences: “Contra those theorists who posit freedom in communal escape and tactics of silence, Coetzee seems to urge the indispensable necessity of situated speech: *to be free we must speak*” (Worthington 255).

In *The Other Side of Silence* André Brink relates the seldom-told story of the German women – orphans, widows or petty criminals – who were transported to Namibia to serve as wives, mistresses or sex slaves to the German colonising army in the late nineteenth century. Following a brutal and disfiguring attack by the German military as punishment for her resistance to the sexual advances of an army officer, one such woman, known only as Hanna X, is left mute and maimed. She has been subjected to female circumcision and, like Friday, she has had her tongue cut out.

After a period of convalescence with a group of Nama tribespeople (who, ironically, use the art of storytelling to rescue her from imminent death) she is eventually sent to Frauenstein: “Prison, convent, madhouse . . . but also asylum, retreat and final haven” (12). Situated far in the Namibian desert, Frauenstein is a hidden outpost in which a small community of physically and emotionally wounded women has been left to fade into the shadowy zone of rumour, myth and conveniently forgotten history. In a contemporary humanist response to early quests for inner truth or peace, silence can be regarded as a refuge, an inner sanctuary within the abhorrent physicality of both the environment and the damaged body. Yet the occupants of Frauenstein appear, like the “fallen” women seeking refuge in the abandoned convent in Morrison’s *Paradise*, as a tragic antithesis to the sanctity of the original users of the old nunnery:

Not all the women were flotsam from the fatherland washed up in search of employment or matrimony. But they had in common the fact that they were all rejects of society, whether through widowhood, indigence, moral turpitude or disability of one kind or another, and that no one else could or would be burdened with the care of them. (12)

Within these walls Hanna is just one of many “grey shadows” (150), discarded women locked away in a remote building, exiled – although German soldiers still make their occasional violent visits – in a “sisterhood of silence” (150). Here she remains “wrapped in silence as in a cocoon” (75). Such evocative barrenness refers both to Hanna – her ambitions dashed, her story lost, even her sexuality impaired – and the inhospitability of the surrounding desert. Hanna may be protected from the horrified eyes of society in this remote penitentiary (even the triumphant soldiers, bursting into Frauenstein to celebrate the killing of the innocent Nama tribespeople, are repelled by Hanna’s ravaged face) but, Brink suggests, it is a grim, unreal existence: “She must cut herself off from feeling, even from the acknowledgement of feeling. It is too dark, too dangerous, too unpredictable, a wilderness into which she dare not enter” (97).

Frauenstein’s silence of “distance and space” is described as a silence “too deep for terror” (3), suggesting, as in the title of the book, a zone that is beyond the socially recognised realm of articulated pain. Such a zone is akin to Crapanzano’s description of imaginary horizons, frontiers that lie forever out of reach: “They mark a change in ontological register. They postulate a beyond that is, by its very nature, unreachable in fact and in representation” (14). As with Hanna’s story, Frauenstein itself seems to lie at the very edge of the imaginary. Stranded in the midst of the desert it appears to falter on the border of myth and history, threatening to disappear beyond memory and speech along with the tales of the women who live within its walls. Language and narration, says Crapanzano, “facilitate fixity” (23); the textual construction and evocation of that which lies beyond the imaginative frontier “situate it within understanding” (22). Yet, for as long as such acts of historical atrocity lie beyond fixity, on the other side of silence perhaps, they remain insubstantial, unrecorded and unrecordable, outside of what is deemed to have “recitation value” (Crapanzano 22) or, as the author in *Foe* explains, “enough strange circumstances to make a story of” (67). This “beyond” provides us with a horizon, a point at which memory gives way to imagination, a border across which Hanna’s story, indeed Hanna’s life, is, Brink suggests, at risk of such forgetting.

Unlike Friday, who makes no attempt at active communication with either Barton or Foe, Hanna is beset with “an unbelievable urge to speak” (87). As she says, for as long as we bear it in silence “it will go on. . . . There comes a time when one has to say No. Someone has to stop it. And the world must know about it, they must learn what has been done to us, they must know our names. . . . And someone must find out about us and hear our sounds” (200). Her attempts to use the written word to name her attackers, however, are abandoned when she realises that the pages she fills with her story are left unread. Frau Knesebeck, the woman in charge of Frauenstein, assumes that these notes validate the incorrect story that saw a group of Nama tribespeople murdered as scapegoats for the injuries done to her. Before giving up on written communication Hanna writes a nonsensical story that is also left unread, so proving to herself that undesirable truth is no different from inarticulate babble:

Hanna spends half an hour burning everything she has written, each sheet separately. At first she is shaking with rage. Burn, burn! As if it is her own pyre. But as she grows more weary and her movements slow down, a deeper, inexplicable satisfaction spreads through her. Yes, this is a necessary act. How could it be otherwise? What she has written did not deserve to be told . . . The truth cannot be told, that is why it is the truth. (90)

Brink thus conveys the story of the genocide of an entire people (in 1904 the German colonising army massacred an estimated 65,000 members of Namibia's Herero tribe) through the account of a German woman whose story is locked and double locked in silence – the silence of tonguelessness, of official intervention (the facts surrounding her exile in Namibia defy the inquiries of the modern-day researcher investigating her life) and of remote incarceration. The truth cannot be told, Brink suggests, because any truth that is contrary to the requirements of the dominant race, the narrativising race, is a truth assigned to silence. When Hanna does open her mouth to imitate those around her, her mute mimicry is quickly abandoned as she considers the cultural significance of her mother tongue:

How can she ever converse with them? It is not just the loss of her tongue which forces her into silence, but knowing that there is nothing in the language she has brought with her which could conceivably say what she would so urgently wish to articulate. (56)

For Hanna, words have become potential instruments of terror and control. Imagining a confession to Pastor Ulrich, the sexually abusive orphanage rector of her childhood, she envisions his words “spilling from his mouth and staining her: that must be, she sometimes thinks, why he wears his silly little bib, to catch the flow of words he spills as messily as the bits and pieces of the meals that smudge his waistcoat” (61). The visceral nature of Ulrich's words is reminiscent of the physicality of language as described by Janet Frame in *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, yet there are similarities too with the strong aversion towards the German language seen in post-Holocaust writings, in which words “saturated with lies or atrocity” (Steiner 146) are no longer considered trustworthy vehicles for truth. As Brink says, “[W]ords have their own past and their own dark geography with them” (56).

In reviewing the first English translation of *Morenga* by Uwe Timm (2003), another novel set during the German occupation of Namibia, Giles Foden describes the appropriateness of the narrative's complex plot and shallow characterisation: “In the glare of genocide, everything else, including novelistic conventions and the apparent certainties they stand for (from the coherent character to coherence itself), comes to seem absurd”

(2003). Certainly, throughout *The Other Side of Silence* Hanna's bid for a coherent account of her attack – as indicative of the brutality of the German regime in Namibia – is repeatedly undermined then abandoned.

### **“Great castles of flesh”: the suffering body**

Violence, writes Tanner, “twists its victims into the status of uncontestable embodiment; instead of manipulating language to construct a representation, the violator offers a hermeneutics of destruction in which the basic unit is physical rather than semiotic, a piece of the human body rather than the word” (6). In response to extreme pain or trauma, the voice, the human spirit and individual autonomy are all seen to collapse as language subsides beneath the irrefutable weight of the body as the prime evidentiary record. In many contemporary narratives incorporating speechlessness we find the pain of an individual expressed not through verbal communication but through the body, as if, in order to convey a certain degree of trauma, the physicality of blood and flesh is required to break the intellectuality of the reading mind. Scarry argues that the rigidity of the body in times of extreme pain or torture successfully negates inner states of consciousness – states that are traditionally, as Lukács explains, a vital component of the novel form. Without such states of consciousness, however, the protagonists are defined, just as they define themselves when in pain, by the corporality of their bodies – a physicality that “constitutes such a monolithic reality that it overwhelms all distinctions of the nature of truth” (Tanner xi). Certainly, when words have already been used to subjugate others, justify crimes and fabricate lies, the dumb figures of Friday and Hanna X incorporate a portrayal of terror unhindered by official or literary censorship; they are the unequivocal testimony to what Coetzee describes as a “damned, dehumanized world. . . . a world of blind force and mute suffering, debased, beneath good and evil” (“Dark Chamber” 367).

In *Foe*, the physical appearance of Friday's mutilated mouth provides a vivid metonym for the rift between the mind that articulates and reasons, and the body that does neither. In place of voice and the ability to articulate complex thought, indicative of the novelist's art as well as one of the primary indicators of civilisation, there is an imagined dark and hollow cavity, a gruesome stump indicative only of human brutality and at odds with the notion of tongues as “organs of pleasure, taste and sexuality, receiving and giving pleasure” (Hughes 104). In *Foe* this difference is described by Barton, who admits to a sensual fascination with the thought of Friday's mutilated mouth: “I could not put out of mind the softness of the tongue, its softness and wetness, and the fact that it does not live in the light, also how helpless it is before the knife once the barrier of the teeth has been passed. The tongue is like the heart, in that way, is it not?” (85). While Barton silently wonders if the severing of the tongue is in fact a metaphor for castration (akin to the double injuries inflicted upon Hanna X), she is adamant that the physical articulation of speech, regardless of the content of that speech, is that which, in her questionable (given the brutality enacted upon Friday) hierarchy of life forms, “elevates us above the beasts” (85).



As far as Barton is concerned, in being rendered mute Friday has been rendered less than human. As if the tongue really is like the heart, Friday's story, his identity and his very humanity, are dead. What is left of his tongue lies, as Barton imagines, "like a toad in eternal winter" (57). Without speech Friday thus becomes the unavoidable embodiment of slavery – vulnerable to rewriting but unequivocal in his damaged physical presence. In an attempt to see beyond such physicality, Barton prays constantly for Friday to relearn the art of speech. Until Friday regains his words – words that Barton can understand – he is, she thinks, destined to live the rest of his days in silence "like the whales, great castles of flesh floating leagues apart as from another" (59). According to Barton, these creatures that cannot speak are unthinking facts of nature, devoid of communality, empathy or sympathy – an insight into Barton's simplistic stratification of animal life quite at odds with Coetzee's own views on animal sentience. Whether Friday's story is ever written or not, Barton believes that without the power of speech he will remain "just a turmoil of feelings and urges" (143) – a pre- or early human state that clearly falls outside her expectations of meaningful behaviour.

When Barton dreams of Friday's recovered speech, however, she does not anticipate a new understanding of his life or the identity of his attackers. She initially regards such a recovery as simply a return to presumably happier times when Friday lived immersed in the prattle of words "as unthinking as a fish in water" (60). This reassuring world of words – akin to Reta's "bounteous feast" with its "arabesques of language" in *Unless* (89) – is desired because it is a natural state of human-ness. The fact that it may be an unthinking zone lacking in any real communication does not diminish its importance for her in the slightest. While this viewpoint completely ignores the extent to which language can manipulate and be manipulated, it also alludes to the completeness with which Friday's story can be eradicated from human history. If the repetition of an event is crucial to the act of witnessing – witnessing is like "treading water, it must keep on keeping on; if one stops one sinks out of sight into oblivion" (Douglass and Vogler 44) – then it is clear that Friday's very literal sinking out of sight at the conclusion of the book enacts this loss of effective voice. In light of the complete suppression of Friday's story, Barton thus fails in her role of the enlightened postcolonial speaker testifying on behalf of a subjected Other. While she realises that she has no authority to speak on behalf of Friday, she refuses to attend to the story – or the degree of trauma that marks his story – implicit in his silence. Dori Laub notes that, to a victim of trauma, silence may be both a defeat and a sanctuary or "fated exile":

The listener must know all this and more. He or she must *listen to and hear the silence*, speaking mutely both in silence and in speech, both from behind and from within the speech. He or she must recognize, acknowledge and address that silence, even if this simply means respect – and knowing how to wait. ("Bearing Witness" 58)

While Cruso makes apparent his lack of interest in adhering to this advice, Barton's failure to "recognize, acknowledge and address" Friday's silence is at odds with her belief in her own beneficent regard for Friday's story. She refuses to "listen in" to Friday's silence and so engage with the trauma of his past in much the same way that Foe refuses to incorporate the telling silence of Friday into his as yet unwritten narrative.

Despite her claims to the contrary, Barton is in fact fearful of the potential revelations of Friday's returned voice. Not only will words name the atrocity behind his tonguelessness – and so reveal a truth or demand an action that she is not prepared to face – but the non-human sounds of a different species (she imagines inhuman grunts and cries, like those of a bird or ape, erupting from Friday's mouth) will act, she believes, as further evidence of the level of subjugation inflicted upon the slave. As long as Friday remains silent, the other characters, particularly Barton, are left to ignore – or at most exhibit a shallow curiosity in – any suggestion of pain or suffering. The fragile structure of a polite and humane collectivity is thus left unthreatened by the animal-like sounds that would serve as evidence of sanctioned cruelty.

Just as Barton's attempts to assimilate Friday's experiences into a western novel never progress beyond an often frustrated acknowledgement of the dumb physicality of the ex-slave's presence, so Brink in *The Other Side of Silence* opts for a non-verbal act of exposure on behalf of Hanna's wounds to end his narrative, as opposed to any recordable denouement that would suggest her experiences have been successfully told (the anonymous researcher investigating Hanna's story never does learn of this, her final act) and thus resolved through the subsequent suicide of Captain Hauptmann Bohlke, the man who first raped her and ordered the mutilation of her body. After repeated failed attempts to "tell" the truth of her injuries, Hanna X comes to rely solely on the evidence provided by the unsightly injuries on her body. When she finally succeeds in finding Bohlke, she simply reveals to him her naked, disfigured body (and the simple written reminder of the words used by Bohlke moments before he first raped her: "'When I fuck a woman . . . she stays fucked'" [145]). At this moment she becomes – she *is* – the embodiment of unsightly barbarity and suffering, unprotected by the distancing mechanisms of explanation or literary analysis or any insistence on meaning. She knows she will later be arrested and probably killed but in presenting her damaged body – and in later forcing the officer to walk naked through the streets of the town – she tells her story more eloquently and, Brink argues, more inarguably than might any number of words. This act of self-display falls outside the recorded and written data available to future generations (including the anonymous researcher investigating Hanna's story), yet it ensures that the townspeople, like Bohlke himself, cannot but see in Hanna X's disfigured body the work of the German military, unhampered by the prevarication and lies of official language and propaganda. As Crapanzano says:

The experience of the body is that which one cannot doubt. The body, that bodily experience signified by the "body", becomes the *symbol* of the intransigent, the incontestable, that which, paradoxically, is outside the symbolic, outside language, because it resists splitting into symbol and

symbolized. . . . *Yet*, we can speak of the body, its experience, its divisions, its history, and, in speaking of the body, bodily experience is alienated from itself. It becomes an object of discourse: the body spoken. (73)

Tanner notes that the objectifying pressure of the reader's gaze allows that reader to see "not the brutality of the act of violation but the brute-like characteristics of its victim" (33) and in both *Foe* and *The Other Side of Silence* the reader's encounter with the damaged body is pre-empted by the disturbing duality of horror and fascination experienced by the other characters and suggestive of the equally disturbing perspective of the torturer, as Coetzee explains:

What the prisoner knows, what the police know he knows, is that he is helpless against whatever they chose to do to him. The torture room thus becomes like the bedchamber of the pornographer's fantasy where, insulated from moral or physical restraint, one human being is free to exercise his imagination to the limit in the performance of vileness upon the body of another. ("Dark Chamber" 363)

In Hanna's final act of exposing the irrevocable evidence of the torturer's imagination as inscribed on her body, Brink subscribes to the trope of the spectacular, as if the only technique available to the writer to illicit the appropriate response from the jaded reader or blinkered community is to brandish the damaged physicality of the sufferer. It is here, Foster argues, in the trauma of "diseased or dangered bodies", that the subject "has absolute authority, for one cannot challenge the trauma of another: one can only believe it, even identify with it, or not" (123-24).

In Morrison's *Beloved* the trauma of the scarred body of Sethe – as representative of the trauma of the millions of Africans victimised through the 300 years of the trans-Atlantic slave trade – is described in exact, if protracted, detail. The debasement to which Sethe is subject is epitomised by the "project" devised by the white master, the feared "Schoolteacher", in which he measures Sethe's body as part of what he deems to be anthropological research. Sethe later overhears him instructing one of his pupils how to draw a picture of her: "No, no. That's not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up" (193). When his nephew later "overbeats" Sethe, Schoolteacher tells him to "think – just think – what would his own horse do if you beat it beyond the point of education. Or Chipper, or Samson. Suppose you beat the hounds past that point thataway" (149). The final violation of Sethe, during which Schoolteacher tells his nephews to hold Sethe, who is six months pregnant with her fourth child, and "steal her milk", endorses this repugnant casting of Sethe as akin to the most subjected of animals – a form of psychological violation that leaves indelible emotional scars.

As Robert Holton says, the social taxonomy adopted by Schoolteacher effectively robs black American slaves of “their discursive legitimacy, their humanity, their selfhood” (213), yet the physical scarring of Sethe also holds her to the materiality of her damaged body as an enduring reminder of the psychological damage done to her (and to black American slaves in general) under the authority of the white plantation owner. Such is her state of terror and shame that, in response to another imminent attack by Schoolteacher and his nephews, Sethe murders her baby daughter in order to save her from being similarly abused. In this one act Morrison conveys the extent of the harm done by Schoolteacher and his kin. Later, during an act of exorcism designed to return the young woman who appears to be the embodiment of the murdered baby back to the world of the dead, “the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash” (261). Again it is not the explanatory power of language that releases Sethe from the ghosts of the past but, like Friday’s final, impenetrable act of communication, it is a sound that “recalls a primal time before word, [that] lies in the realm of the body and its renewing powers” (Corey 44). In both these books such waves of sound hold their own physical power, over and above the language of the dominant culture. Indecipherable to those outside the pain of such experiences, these voices nevertheless refuse to accede to the complete soundlessness that would leave such experiences removed from communal discourse altogether.

The reliance on the body to reveal the truth – to *be* the truth – is also evident in Seamus Deane’s *Reading in the Dark*. In this work the bloodied history of Ireland is honed down into the story of a single family and the revenge killing of Eddie McIlhenny, a falsely accused informer and the young narrator’s uncle on his father’s side. The knowledge shared by the mother and her son, the young narrator – that Eddie was innocent and that it was the boy’s grandfather who ordered the execution – becomes a secret “so terrible it silences all realist narratives that might articulate it” (Stafford 120). Rather than binding the boy and his mother in shared complicity, however, the sheer knowledge of the facts inspires in the mother a terrible burden of shame and antagonism. As the boy reasons, “It wasn’t just that she was trapped by what had happened. She was trapped by my knowing it. It must be shame, I decided. She’s paralysed by shame. . . . Every time she saw me, she felt exposed, even though I made it clear I would never say anything” (223). As a response to the degrading nature of this knowledge, silence recurs throughout the novel as an ever-present threat to truth and illumination, rendering more than one character speechless through illness, death or madness. As well as the general unspeakability of the family secret, Larry, the man who carried out Eddie’s murder, is later struck dumb, his “greasy tie twisted like a tongue inside his V-necked pullover” (186), while the real informer whose treachery resulted in Eddie’s execution appears to have fled the country. As Deane’s young narrator notes, “[E]veryone who had been [at the farmhouse the night of the execution] was dead or in exile or silenced one way or the other. And how did I know I had been told the truth?” (206). The boy’s increasing awareness of the truth is matched by his mother’s gradual

slide into silence, escalating from the hush of a shared secret to psychotic periods of wordlessness to complete speechlessness. This slide is, in turn, paralleled by the collapse of her body: “Everything bore down on her. She got smaller, more intense, her features sealed into no more than two or three expressions” (217-18). The more his mother’s pain is shifted to the realm of the body as “the only available site in which the narrative of terror can be inscribed” (Stafford 131), the more the young narrator has to rely on the language of that body to understand his mother’s psychological state. The sound of her sobs, “a sound that moved and wavered in phases, a stripping off of unbearably tight panics that only found more – tighter ones – within” (143), is profoundly disturbing for her son to hear, suggesting as it does a level of despair at the very edge of human endurance. For Deane’s young narrator they are sounds that encourage him both to run away and to run straight into “the maw of the sobbing, to throw my arms wide to receive it, to shout into it, to make it come at me in words, words, words and no more of the ceaseless noise, its animality, its broken inflection of my mother” (143). For him, the potential impact of the truth is better than this lapse into subhuman suffering, a realm all the more terrifying as it reduces the all-important figure of his mother to a being strange and infinitely hurt.

When his mother is rendered completely silent as the result of a stroke, however, the young narrator feels only relief as he willingly takes on the burden of being the only family member cognisant of the truth of Eddie’s execution: “I felt it was almost a mercy, when my mother suffered a stroke and lost the power of speech, just as the Troubles came in October 1968. I would look at her, sealed in her silence, and now she would smile slightly at me and very gently, almost imperceptibly, shake her head. I was to seal it all in too. Now we could love each other, at last, I imagined” (230).

Throughout this book the physical decline of the boy’s mother is attended by her weakening grip on reality. Even before she begins lapsing in and out of silence, she is identified as having a “touch of the other world about her” (51), suggesting that her eventual silence is not an altogether surprising withdrawal into a state of otherworldliness (similar to the adopted silence of the spiritually-inclined Clara in Allende’s *The House of Spirits*). The terrible sounds of her sobbing are later echoed by the cries of the souls of the unburied as heard on the mystical “field of the disappeared” – you are not, says the boy’s father, supposed to hear pain like that (53). As Jane Stafford explains, “For all the characters in *Reading in the Dark*, the spoken word is far more potent and dangerous than the written. . . . The secrets which are linguistically forbidden manifest themselves there as madness and physical disease” (128-29). By encoding the direct representation of terror in myth, says Stafford, its impact is reduced. Yet such encoding also serves to denote the barriers to the articulation of, or response to, national trauma. If such trauma must be “understood, explained and made coherent through public reflection and discourse” in order to be ingrained in collective memory (Eyerman 61), in this instance the secrecy, fear, shame, blame and guilt that surround the murder of Eddie resist such public reflection. Just as Friday is denied any communal commemoration, this silencing of an individual serves as an apt analogy for a country that is still, Deane suggests, coming to terms with the violence of subjugation, resistance and conflicting allegiances.

There are, however, risks for the writer who relies on the body as the physical proof of pain. In *Foe* the barbarity of what remains of Friday's severed tongue is, as we have seen, a source of perverse fascination as opposed to unmitigated sympathy for Barton. Stuart Murray similarly describes the fascination with the brutalised body as made evident in the 1831 autobiographical account of Mary Prince, a West Indian slave in Bermuda. While Prince's account was an attempt to appeal to the empathy of the emancipist reader, the third edition of *The History of Mary Prince a West Indian Slave* contained, in response to requests from readers, more detailed descriptions of her physical scarring. Such information, Murray argues, was "inevitably a source of vicarious pleasure for an audience that might gaze upon slave wounds even as it sharpened moral outrage" (62). While the physical proof of suffering provides an inarguable truth, such physicality clearly risks the associated voyeurism of a shock-hungry (or shock-numbed) audience. Murray argues that in the scars on Prince's body there was inscribed "the narrative not only of her own past but also that of the erudition of slavery itself. Her body not only furnished the outward signs of an inward misery, it bore the written messages of a savage institution" (63). The popularity of this book, therefore, suggests that the mutilated body of Mary Prince – as with that of Friday, Sethe and Hanna X – does indeed provide an insight into a degree of personal abuse while also casting light on the "savage institution" that not only enacts the abuse but which may also respond with an insidious thrill to such acts of violation.

A further risk in the depiction of the abused or brutalised body is the alignment of the writer and the reader with the objectifying – and thus diminishing – gaze of the orchestrator of such brutality. The reduction of victims of colonisation and slavery to the realm of the body is a frequent tactic used by a dominant group to justify the alienation of a disempowered group. In limiting any access to the character of Friday in *Foe*, Coetzee forces the reader to adopt an objectivity disturbingly similar to Crusoe's lack of interest in the ex-slave's story, and even Barton's attempts to teach Friday language carry all the condescension of a parent teaching a child, or a master instructing a slave. In his essay "The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights," Holocaust survivor and philosopher Emmanuel Levinas describes the extent of this inference of inferiority, even sub-humanity: "We were subhuman, a gang of apes. . . . How can we deliver a message about our humanity which, from behind the bars of quotation marks, will come across as anything other than monkey talk" (153). Unable or unwilling to give voice, the victims of violence explored in this chapter are also easily ostracised by their fellow human beings. They are the objects of their own tribe's abhorrence and shunned reminders of a people's subjugation.

In *The Silent* Australian writer Jack Dann tells the story of Edmund McDowell, or Mundy, a young boy in the state of Virginia who finds himself incapable of speech after witnessing the rape and murder of his mother by Union and Confederate deserters in the early days of the American Civil War. It was at the moment of witnessing, Mundy recalls, when he is seen by one of the guilty soldiers, that, "I remember thinking then that I was invisible like air or like a tree in a huge forest" (21). This sense of invisibility lasts throughout the book. He is present during a number of military campaigns, but his very survival suggests to him, as a young and

traumatised boy, that the enemy cannot see him. His silence is an essential part of this invisibility, transferred as it is to an ephemeral animality. When he says, “Course, I wasn’t crying. I was invisible now and wasn’t part of the world any more” (25), we can see a boy clinging to the refuge of anonymity as a sanctuary from the events he has witnessed. His silence, he believes, puts him in a netherworld, a ghostly terrain in which he is protected from the atrocities of war as well as the pain of his loss. At times when he is tempted to speak, the very thought of utterance leaves him feeling exposed and vulnerable to the terror of the battleground:

[S]uddenly, like I was having a vision, I remembered how to write and how to speak; and it was like my hand was moving all on its own, and I was about to write “Edmund McDowell” and I knew I could do it, and I thought that if I opened my mouth at that very second I could say my name . . . and then I suddenly got scared, as bad as if someone was shooting at me or when I heard Poppa screaming in the house for Mother, and I knew – I knew – that if I wrote down my name, everything would change in a bad way, and I’d be back to the farm and mother would be lying there on the flags and the house would be on fire again, and the spirit dog wouldn’t take me for no spirit, he would come after me, and just then I could smell his wet fur and his breath, and it smelled like death and putrefaction. (192)

This reference to Mundy’s name is indicative of the loss of subjectivity that aligns itself to silence as a result of trauma. In the same way that the reader is never informed of Friday’s real name, that Deane’s young protagonist is never named and that Hanna’s name is permanently incomplete, so the significance of Mundy’s lapse into silence is emphasised by the loss of his name. Lacking that sense of human identity as defined by the communality of other named – and naming – individuals, Mundy adopts the name of the mythic Salamander. In this guise he retreats from the world of the living to a ghostly semi-existence: “Looking into that mirror, I couldn’t tell if I was a spirit or a person. I wasn’t anything” (242). Within such silent insubstantiality Mundy believes himself to be safe, both from the present danger of the battlefields and from the memory of the brutal rape and murder of his mother.

As Scarry says, physical pain does not simply resist language but “actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (4). Under torture, therefore, “[the prisoner’s voice] objectifies the step-by-step backward movement along the path by which language came into being” (20). As well as actual abuse and torture, the horror of a nation bent on destroying part of its own population is portrayed by this reversion of language to a prehuman or animalistic state. Just as Hanna’s cries are described as animals sounds “in which all her pain and bitterness . . . break out” (Brink 261), Mundy longs to scream out in horror, but “all I could do was open my mouth and the only thing that came out was a breath sound like ‘ha’ without any voice, like I was laughing at all

this” (33). And later “when I tried I could only make the ‘ha’ sound. Now, that surprised me some, and I figured I’d never get out of being myself completely, but maybe it was just that Salamander the Fire King didn’t talk neither” (335). Certainly, Mundy wants to be able to laugh at “all this” and so divorce himself from the horror of what he sees, yet, unable to do so, his sole recourse is to dissociate himself from any sense of human empathy or vulnerability.

As he travels across the Shenandoah Valley, Mundy witnesses the agonies of the wounded soldiers – like him they are lost in wordlessness, relying instead on animal groans as if beyond the human level of speech: “[A]nd all this groaning and gurgling and coughing and farting and wheezing and calling and everything were like animal or insect sounds like chitterin’, or maybe like strange birds in a jungle. Altogether it’s a sound like nothing else” (33). For young Mundy the inhuman nature of these sounds, as with the barbarity he has witnessed, necessitates a split from ordinary human existence. He believes the wounded soldiers are, like him, partly of this world, partly of the next world: “[T]hey were probably spirits now”, he says, “still smelling and hearing but, like me, not being able to talk” (36). In the company of these soldiers he realises the extent to which his muteness alienates him from others: “[J]ust because I couldn’t talk they figured that I wasn’t any more civilized than a creature in a side show and would walk around naked in front of everyone” (233). This analogy recalls Barton’s description of the spectacle of Friday dancing naked under Foe’s legal robes and wigs – a scene on which she “gaped without shame at what had hitherto been veiled from me” (119).

Foster explains that in Lacanian terms animals “are caught in the gaze of the world” while humans, with our access to the symbolic, remain outside of such “imaginary capture” (140). This reliance on surfaces is exemplified by Mundy’s dependence on his own “animal” exterior – a reflector of the objective gaze of an uncaring world but also a shield from the non-physical pain of psychological trauma. As Mundy clings to this shallow presence he remains present but unharmed, attentive to the barbarism of war that surrounds him but protected from the past and potentially the future pain of the witness and possible victim. His idea of a spirit world through which he travels silently, invisibly, serves as both a refuge from harm and a withdrawal from himself – without a voice, without a name to call himself, he abandons Mundy the real boy: “I changed from being Mundy to being someone else. Even though people might be able to see me . . . I was still invisible” (87). Such a literal bid for inviolability is, from a child’s perspective, completely logical while, from an adult reader’s viewpoint is also entirely tragic.

### **The burial of pain: atrocity hidden in history**

In accounts of civil strife and conflict the silence of the victims of, or witnesses to, atrocity mimics the enduring silence of history in which languages are forgotten, civilisations lost and the unspoken stories of the demise of whole communities are buried. History can and does lapse into the silence of the unknown without any help or interference from humanity. Much of the past remains buried, much presents an exhaustive challenge



to the excavators of truth (archaeologists, forensic scientists, historians, storytellers) to appear even within the realms of guesswork. Against the natural erosion of knowledge through time, the deliberate burial of the events of more recent history – as epitomised by the cutting out of Friday’s tongue – does not appear too extraordinary. Indeed, if post-traumatic stress disorder is “a belated sign of an impossible history which the traumatized cannot entirely possess” (Najita 18), then the originating event of such trauma tends to be confronted only through half-remembered and often uncontrolled forms of re-experience rather than the methodical excavation of history. The mute character, while a persistent reminder of trauma, is thus aligned to the lack of voice surrounding that event and the incoherence of memory that explains or supports our lack of ability to articulate such events. As Langer says, the horrors of recent history have so stunned the imagination of the artist “that it has been paralysed: history collaborates with invention to produce – silence” (*Literary Imagination* 15). In narrativising the threat to truth, the authors studied here reveal their concern for the silencing or cultural “forgetting” of history. As Hutcheon says, postmodern fiction stresses “the tensions that exist, on the one hand, between the pastness (and absence) of the past and the presentness (and presence) of the present, and on the other, between the actual events of the past and the historian’s act of processing them into facts” (*Politics of Postmodernism* 73).

Gitzen argues that Coetzee’s fiction repeatedly demonstrates that “those who are silent, whether through choice or necessity, are subject to abuse and exploitation” (15), yet there is the argument too that *because* these characters have been abused, exploited or even made witness to such abuse, they are rendered silent, whether it is the total and irrevocable muteness of Friday in *Foe*, the victim’s reluctance to confide as seen in Lucy in *Disgrace*, the silence elected by the witness to terror as seen in Norah in *Unless*, or the response to a community’s unwillingness to listen as seen in Melinda in *Speak*. By refusing to give direct voice to these stories of abuse Coetzee abdicates the traditional role of the writer as the “sole authority for meaning and identity construction”, so issuing an invitation to his readers “to enter into and co-write the somewhat opaque, fragmented text” (Worthington 252). Yet, as author, Coetzee also denies us the opportunity *not* to witness the divisions left by colonisation, slavery and apartheid in a manner observed in other narratives of dispossession:

The project of recuperating culture and identity in the wake of colonization . . . often involves confronting potentially traumatizing as well as alienating representations of the past not only because of the violence of contact but also because these depictions have been produced in literate form from the perspective of the colonizer. It is not surprising, then, that the history of contact and colonization resurfaces generations later in the contemporary space of the novel. The shreds and pieces of colonial history are the repressed histories of the marginalized. These histories of the indigene, of women, children, the criminalized and dispossessed are those disavowed by empire and the emergent postcolonial nation-state because they register the imposition and intrusion of the capitalist mode of production on predominantly subsistence economies. The violence enacted by

this imposition and its denial provide the basis for the claim of repressed history. The process of seeking recognition for native claims . . . hinges upon the acknowledgement of this past which resurfaces on the social level in a manner akin to that of trauma. (Najita 18)

In *Foe* both Cruso and Friday are seen to resist translation into Barton's "colonizing narrative" (Jolly 9). For both master and slave, this refusal to be "rescued" through such narrativisation reveals a determination by the author not to take on the responsibility of resolving colonisation, choosing instead to analyse the theme of marginality through the necessarily truncated mode of postcolonial discourse. In his analysis of silenced voices, Richard Todd describes the process of "recovery" by which novelists give a voice to the "dispossessed", while noting that "it shouldn't be forgotten that she or he is nevertheless inventing that voice" (198). Coetzee, however, refuses such a process – he alerts the reader to the dispossessed while also avoiding the transgressive assumption of voice. In this regard Coetzee's attention is not so much on the representation of history but rather on the discourse surrounding the representation of history, or "the discourses of subjects positioned in history" (Atwell 110). *Foe* supports this theory, not because Friday cannot speak but because Friday is not given speech by the author. Barton's failure to make Friday talk, Coetzee thus suggests, is in fact a form of freedom for the ex-slave. When Barton asks Foe, "If Friday is not mine to set free, whose is he?" (99), we see the degree to which giving voice to a disenfranchised Other can be a further act of assumed ownership. In being left unresolved, Friday assures his resistance to the paternalism of such a "rescue".

Despite this limited sovereignty, however, Friday's speechlessness paves the way for lies or guesswork to fill the vacuum of information. As Barton tells Foe, "Friday has no command of words and therefore no defence against being reshaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others. I say he is a cannibal and he becomes a cannibal . . . what he is to the world is what I make of him. Therefore the silence of a Friday is a helpless silence" (121-22). Foe's later response reiterates the narrator's admission that the untold stories of a group or tribe robbed of its voice is vulnerable to false interpretations: "We deplore the barbarism of whoever maimed [Friday] yet have we, his later masters, not reason to be secretly grateful? For as long as he is dumb we can tell ourselves his desires are dark to us, and continue to use him as we wish" (148). So we are reminded of the failed attempts by Hanna X to name her attackers, and the easy, fatal, if incorrect apportioning of blame for her injuries to the innocent tribespeople.

According to Graham Huggan, both *Foe* and *the bone people* are texts:

whose re-inscription of the history of their own formerly colonised countries, or whose re-exploration of the conceptual framework of colonial relations, involves a reaction against the self-privileging practices of European colonialism. These practices include the "muting" of the colonial subject. (19)

Huggan goes on to describe *the bone people* as an allegory of “New Zealand’s often painful attempt to come to terms with a history of colonial dependence and with continuing tensions between its ‘indigenous’ (Maori) and European (Pakeha) communities” (16). Within these tensions, Huggan says, Simon’s silence is “a gesture of resistance to prescribed social ‘norms’” (16) – an apt summation that can also be applied to the silence of both Friday and Sethe. This theory is complicated, however, by the fact that Simon stands outside both Pakeha and Maori cultures. Certainly, his role is partly to reunite Joe (Maori) with his family and Kerewin (Pakeha) with hers, but the bringing together of the two cultures serves to alienate Simon from both – he may be the archetypal redeemer but, in his silence, he stands on neither side of this bridge. As Huggan says, his silence is incorporated “into the mythical pattern which embraces the novel [yet] it is also disengaged from it” (17).

Najita argues that the character of Simon alludes to a relatively obscure chapter in New Zealand history – the forced transportation of child convicts from the overcrowded Parkhurst Prison on the Isle of Wight to Australia and New Zealand during the 1840s (the first shipment of boy convicts arrived in 1842 just two years after the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi – a chronological relationship used by Najita to link historically these boy convicts with Maori through their “mutual oppression under settler nationalism” [111]). Banished “beyond the seas” these children were sent to New Zealand as a source of cheap labour. On arrival they were undersized, weak and malnourished, presumably still shackled to their “criminal” histories. While belonging to a more recent past, Simon does fit these descriptions, being small, thin, “bird-boned” (15). His age is indeterminate. He is suspected of stealing and he is referred to as a “vagabond”, “vandal” (37) and “outlaw” (50). His ancestry, as revealed in a letter to Kerewin from the “Secretary to His Lordship the Earl of Conderry” (105), refers to a shady Irish figure “disinherited for disgraceful propensities” (105). Simon’s instinctive hand blocks, his nightmares, his fear of needles (alluding to his father’s heroin addiction) – all signify an abusive past. Even his muteness can be interpreted as an allusion to the silence enforced in nineteenth-century English institutions for wayward children as a sign of Christian repentance – at the “notorious” Pentonville prison “prisoners wore a mask called ‘the beak’ to ensure silence and anonymity” (Najita 109).

Like Friday, Simon’s solipsistic disengagement from speech and from his community ensures that he is not “rescued” from his outsider status and transformed into a fully functioning, explored and explorable fictional character. Just as Barton fails to tell Friday’s story, so Kerewin’s attempts to understand Simon’s muddled genealogy do not succeed. Such inconclusiveness “implies that an acceptance of historically based difference is necessary for the foundation of a new structure based not on the blood-descent of nuclear families but on the estranged oppressions wrought under empire and settler nationalism” (Najita 117). Simon’s injuries act as a determined bid for such oppression to remain validated, unembellished by more favourable re-readings of this country’s colonial history yet unexpunged from our “tribal narratives”. In Bernstein’s and Alexander’s terms, the boy is thus refused entry into the nation’s tribal encyclopedia and denied the diagnosis of socially decreed

collective trauma. In his ongoing resistance to personal, social and historical disclosure he thus remains a primary vehicle through which Hulme explores colonialism and criminality.

The silence of history as a ready guise for the enforced silence and subsequent invisibility of a disempowered or overwhelmed community or group is also evident in Morrison's *Beloved* when the arrival of the eponymous character prompts Sethe to remember the "unspeakable" (37) events of the past. While these events include the acts of violence perpetrated by Schoolteacher and his nephews, they are also aligned to a deeper past, a barely remembered mythic zone described by Paul D as an "ocean-deep place he had once belonged to" (Morrison 264). This is the past of a tribe stolen from its country and subjected to slavery, the "unarticulated connections to the African past of which [Sethe], and every slave, was denied knowledge" (Murray 64), a past deliberately eradicated during the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in which names were changed, families divided, native language banned and millions killed. Susan Corey explains that the experience of slavery leaves its mark not only on the lives of Morrison's characters, and indeed on the country as a whole, but also on the more distant memory of another homeland, "a level of reality beyond language" (37), evoked only through more recent experiences of pain or hardship.

As representatives of these "unarticulated connections", Sethe and her murdered baby are deprived the fullness of character equated with the traditional expectations of the novel as an "adventure of interiority" (Lukács 89), becoming instead symbols of a more distant, collective past and those experiences of slavery that have left "indelible effects on America, a nation that continues to suffer the social and psychological consequences of the history of slavery and racism" (Corey 31-32). Such a cultural determination to translate individual experience into a collective whole results in the neglect of personal memory "because it is thought to act as a barrier to forms of collective behaviour that transcend the normal routines of daily life" (Eyerman 65). Such collective memories, Eyerman goes on to say, "are retained and passed on either as part of an ongoing process of what might be called public commemoration, in which officially sanctioned rituals are engaged to establish a shared past, or through discourse more specific to a particular group or collective" (65). In denying full access to the meaning of such commemorations – such as the mysterious writings on the Oven in Morrison's *Paradise* or Friday's indecipherable actions on his small canoe – these authors reveal the extent to which the experiences of slavery or subjugation in general are excised from the "tribal encyclopedia" of the dominant group and even denied public commemoration. Even those opportunities to bring certain events back into the discourse of a specific group are taken tentatively, as if gauging the acceptability of such information. Sethe's personal history, including the humiliation of being "milked" and the murder of her baby daughter, is shown to test the limits of socially acceptable discourse on trauma – those events that would be included in Bernstein's encyclopedia – just as the violence behind Friday's mutilated mouth and Joe's violence against Simon would be deemed to lie beyond socially sanctioned discourse. So, even within the framework of once inaccessible records of enslavement or colonisation, the act of commemoration or attention adheres only to those events agreed as

permissible by the selected writers of such encyclopedias – those people responsible, like Coetzee's Foe, for authorising or authenticating collective trauma, or not.

Holton argues that the exclusion of the perspective of the African slave from dominant narratives has widespread ramifications “since the legitimacy of social groups depends on their ability to articulate publicly a perspective, to assert with legitimacy their view of the world and of their position in it” (167). Symptomatic of the traditional voicelessness of the African American experience, Morrison presents her historical view of the world obliquely, legitimising this experience while at the same time using the curtailment of speech within the narrative to evoke the marginalisation and oppression of this social group. If, as Holton says, “communal memory acts as a safeguard against the eradication of African-American historical experience and identity that is a consequence of the dominant discourse” (170), in *Beloved* this experience is kept alive through an immutable language based on a coda of silences, unspoken memories, and scars – a language which also serves to draw attention to the exclusion of the African-American voice from this dominant discourse, as also seen in *Foe*. Within the hierarchical power structure that defines history, that determines linguistic currency and that bans the use of indigenous languages, silence exposes the disenfranchisement of the black American voice and the lack of idiom with which these voices might breach the cultural gap and historical memory of a nation based, at least to some extent, on alienation and domination. As such, it helps reinstate trauma as a valid tool for our understanding of nationhood, adding a final explanatory note to a people's mythology, history, laws or systems of bias. In narrative form such trauma is enacted by characters “who are unable to work through their impossible histories” (Najita 19). As such, they remain locked in their representative roles, belonging to, or *being*, the initial traumatic event as it seeks its own validation through the contemporary novel.

Early on in *The Other Side of Silence* the anonymous researcher trying to trace Hanna's story stumbles across the record of a planned court case that was:

cancelled before it could come to court, as a result of the suicide of an army officer, Hauptmann Bohlke, reputedly involved in the matter. After which, it seems, official intervention very effectively put a lid on it, no doubt to save the reputation of His Imperial Majesty's army. With that, she disappears once again into silence, still stripped of a surname, still fiercely, pathetically (or “obdurately”, as the report on the aborted trial had it) silent. (6)

The relevance of the discovery of the aborted court case is not fully explained until the final chapter when we learn that it is Hanna's confrontation with the Captain “reputedly involved in the matter” that led to his suicide, yet it is evident too that the details of Hanna's story – and Bohlke's actions – have been successfully excised from official history. Her loss from the official transcripts of history begins aboard the *Hans Woermann* bringing Hanna and her fellow shipmates to Namibia. On this voyage an administrative error results in her name being

accorded to a woman who commits suicide and is buried at sea following her repeated rape by the ship's sailors. From here, the train journey during which Haana is raped and mutilated, her convalescence with the Nama tribespeople and her incarceration at Frauenstein augments the suppression of her story from the chronicles of colonisation. As Brink says, voices once heard are "lost, mute in history" (36) and Hanna, hidden away in a remote corner of the "interminable silence of the desert" (12), stands for the forgotten, seemingly expendable cast of German women lost within the violent past of Namibia's colonisation. Even Hanna's laborious journey across the desert to confront her attackers, suggesting a voyage back from Crapanzano's imaginary frontier, fails to result in a definitive entry in Bernstein's tribal encyclopedia as the nameless researcher's unsuccessful search for this chapter of Hanna's life suggests.

Relegating recent events to the stone cold silence of history also serves to thwart any potential acts of revenge or justice against the perpetrators of atrocity. In Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, written shortly after the murder of anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko in 1977, an innocent tribe is killed or tortured as a result of baseless accusations spearheaded by the all-powerful "Empire". Mystified by the self-justified brutality of the imperial forces, the old magistrate continues to focus on the similarly mystifying ruins half buried in the sands close to his small settlement, in particular the several hundred wooden slips bearing a script that he cannot decipher:

I look at the lines of characters written by a stranger long since dead. I do not even know whether to read from right to left or from left to right. . . . I have no idea what they stand for. Does each stand for a single thing, a circle for the sun, a triangle for a woman, a wave for a lake; or does a circle merely stand for "circle", a triangle for "triangle", a wave for "wave"? Does each sign represent a different state of the tongue, the lips, the throat, the lungs, as they combine in the uttering of some multifarious unimaginable extinct barbarian language? (121)

The absence of any information relating to the nature and decline of this ancient civilisation sets a precedent for the violent acts of the "Empire" as epitomised by Colonel Joll and the stuttered account of the young "barbarian" girl, an innocent member of a nomadic tribe whose cruel treatment at the hands of the imperial forces is communicated by way of half-finished sentences, long silences and the repeated phrase "I am tired of talking", so mimicking the obdurate secrecy of the wooden slips. In the same way that Friday's story is locked in inexplicable rituals and music, history here is "obscured and possibly altered by the silence of those most affected by it" (Gitzen 11).

As with Barton in *Foe* and Lurie in *Disgrace*, the unnamed magistrate is unable to understand or translate either the recent or the more distant past; as Gitzen says of Coetzee's characters, "often those who are important to them, whom they wish to understand and whose past they wish to know and possibly record, prove unwilling

or unable to speak to them, thereby leaving obscure a portion of history, however minute” (4). Indeed, this inability to completely understand another’s experience is one of the most profound elements at the heart of Coetzee’s fiction. The blind exactitude of Colonel Joll, the reluctance of the barbarian girl to describe her torturer’s actions and the unintelligibility of the wooden slips from an earlier civilisation, suspected by the magistrate of having built over a previous fort “peopled with the bones of folk who thought they would find safety behind high walls” (15), all point to a silence not only of the perpetrator and the victim but also of the witness that could not, or would not, intervene and, as a result, the body of readers that will never “know” sanctioned terror.

The magistrate’s final pretence at reading the wooden slips, inventing a fabricated context for his translation in order to present his views on the actions of the present-day “Empire” (““And now let us see what this one says. . . . We went to fetch your brother yesterday. They showed us into a room where he lay on a table sewn up in a sheet” [122]), pre-empts the Colonel’s conviction that one day the magistrate will, like Friday and Hanna X, disappear from the history books. As Joll tells him, ““You want to go down in history as a martyr, I suspect. But who is going to put you in the history books? These border troubles are of no significance. In a while they will pass and the frontier will go to sleep for another twenty years. People are not interested in the history of the back of beyond”” (125).

In many of these novels nonsensical actions and unwarrantable crimes – such as the mutilation of Friday’s tongue, Joll’s attack on a community of simple fishing people or the misguided revenge against a small group of Nama tribespeople in *The Other Side of Silence* – are justified as necessary through the convincing use of language – words of admission as a result of torture, or words of conviction as decreed by a person of authority. In both instances such words are believed, and in both instances verbal disagreement or outrage is ineffective. The actions of the magistrate, re-interpreting history as a vehicle for his personal voice of protest against Joll’s administration, reveal his understanding of the way in which language can be used so easily to validate hearsay, supposition, lies and, ultimately, torture, while also communicating to Joll the fallibility of the lame reasoning behind the Empire’s actions. As Langer says in his description of Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937), the painting “laid the foundations for a fresh way of perceiving – and conceiving – reality, as a direct result of the incomprehensible historical action of the decimating of a helpless town, the victimizing of its women and children, for no apparent reason other than the desire (and need?) to terrorize and destroy” (*Literary Imagination* 21). In *Foe*, *Disgrace* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* we see Barton, Lurie and the magistrate all struggling to find voice for such terror. In their very failure, however, we are reminded that Coetzee himself is producing the vivid spectacle of the struggle without resolving this struggle. Rather, he interrogates the language used by those who wish to manipulate the truth, while refusing the reader the satisfactions of a novelistic language that “resolves” via fictional registration historic wrongs.

That accounts of war, terror and death can and do lapse into the remote and depoliticised zone of mythology is further portrayed in *Anil's Ghost* by Michael Ondaatje. With the help of Sri Lankan archaeologist Sarath Diyasena, forensic anthropologist Anil Tissera, invited back to the island of her birth from the United States to try and find proof of Government involvement in nearly two decades of political killings, finds the hurried graves of recently murdered Sri Lankans amongst the historical diggings undertaken by archaeologists in their search for evidence of a more distant past. Anil is aware that “[t]he most precisely recorded moments of history lay adjacent to the extreme actions of nature or civilization” (55) – while individual acts of atrocity can be, if politically expedient, easily obliterated as the natural eradication of the distant past acts as a foundation for the gagging of more recent events: “Violence is whitewashed, history is whitewashed, all as part of a vast enterprise of cosmetic surgery at whose completion nothing will be left but a society for which, and individuals for whom, all violence, all negativity, are strictly forbidden” (Baudrillard 45). As with the magistrate’s fascination with the ancient ruins in Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*, in *Anil's Ghost* Old Palipana the epigraphist is obsessed with the ancient “moth-coloured” writings in the old rock fortress of Sigiriya (82). Only in his more recent years has he begun to find “the hidden histories, intentionally lost, that altered the perspective and knowledge of earlier times. It was how one hid or wrote the truth when it was necessary to lie” (105).

Like Mundy in Dann’s *The Silent*, twelve-year-old Lakma, Palipana’s niece, has withdrawn into a fearful silence and an “adult sullenness of spirit” (103) after witnessing the murder of her parents. Lakma is a minor character in this narrative yet, as one of the few living characters who actually witnesses the brutality of the armed forces, her silence provides a telling portrait of a country terrified of knowing or naming the truth. Harriet Davidson describes the role of the witness in these terms:

The essence of the act of witness may be its difficult relation to historical truth in that it tries to speak of the unspeakable acts of horror or oppression that the power of dominant ideologies tries to hide, sometimes by eliminating all witnesses . . . . The act of witnessing begins in a personal raid on the inarticulate and creates a chain of witnesses each of whom receives this newly wrought history . . . . Through the witness the unspeakable comes to speech as a contextualized and communal event; thus the literature of witness is often deeply and profoundly political. (165-66)

Ridden by nightmares, Lakma represents this attempt – and initial failure – to speak of the horrors witnessed before the “unspeakable comes to speech”. Following her traumatic experience, she remains immune to the healing environment of the religious home to which she is sent. It is only when she is rescued from the site of modern-day Christianity and taken to Palipana’s older forest monastery (akin to the converted nunnery where Pallas in *Paradise* seeks refuge) to become “a silent amanuensis for his whispered histories” (105), that Lakma, “scared of the evidence of anything human” (104), learns to live alongside another person.



For Sarath's brother, the young amphetamine-addicted doctor Gamini, the gruelling task of officially authorising the photographs of those murdered or tortured is made both easier and safer if truth is restricted – he prefers working with photographs in which the faces had been covered: “He worked better this way, and there was no danger of his recognising the dead” (213). Clearly there is a very real danger in being privy to the truth of Government-sanctioned violence,<sup>2</sup> yet Ondaatje here is also revealing what Christian Bok, in his discussion on political violence in Ondaatje's work, regards as the author's increasing awareness of the sociopolitical implications of silence. Such a silence, he says, is imposed upon individuals:

in order to prevent them from exercising power. Within such a context, silence no longer becomes an act of sociopolitical rebellion, but an act of sociopolitical surrender . . . Whoever controls discourse, controls official truth, and any socially sanctioned attempt on the part of the oppressed to break their silence implies the possible loss of their own narrative voice. (120)

In covering the photographed faces of the dead, Gamini is reassuring the orchestrators of such atrocity that his silence is assured, while, on another level, Ondaatje is revealing how the censorship of even an intolerable truth can be seen as a desirable response to atrocity on both political and literary fronts. Here again, Ondaatje alludes to the limited responses available to the writer in the face of political terror, responses identified by Coetzee as “namely, either to ignore [the state's] obscenities or else to produce representations of them” (“Dark Chamber” 364). And ignorance, he says, is encouraged by the state in question, as seen in South Africa's laws restricting photographs of prisons in South Africa:

The response of South Africa's legislators to what disturbs their white electorate is usually to order it out of sight. If people are starving, let them starve far away in the bush, where their thin bodies will not be a reproach. If they have no work, if they migrate to the cities, let there be roadblocks, let there be curfews, let there be laws against vagrancy, begging, squatting, and let offenders be locked away so that no one has to hear or see them. . . . (At which the great white electorate heaves a sigh of relief – how much more bearable the newscasts have become!). (“Dark Chamber” 361)

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<sup>2</sup> In responding to this book, several critics have drawn attention to what they regard as an over-simplification by Ondaatje of the complex political situation in Sri Lanka. According to Jon Kertzer, Ondaatje “does not offer a political novel of the sort that maps out a political milieu, debates social ideas, or even bothers to distinguish between the warring factions, apart from mentioning a brutal government fighting guerrillas in the north and insurgents in the south” (117). Yet, while Ondaatje has been accused of subsuming political complexity to

While Ondaatje does not use actual photographs in this book, he clearly aligns the difficulty of representing historical terror (and the corresponding need to represent such terror) in textual form with that of the photographic image. Both are enlisted to record real events but both can also falsify the real they represent. “That is the paradox of the postmodern,” writes Hutcheon. “. . . Like writing, photography is as much transformation as recording; representation is always alteration, be it in language or in images, and it always has its politics” (*Politics of Postmodernism* 91-92). Bok goes on to argue that “Ondaatje is admired by critics in part because he can fix his gaze upon violence without flinching” (110) yet, as we have seen, in this work Ondaatje successfully conveys the full extent of such violence not by affixing a bold gaze on the atrocities of Sri Lanka but by focusing instead on the level of censorship involved in restricting such access. In his poem “White Dwarfs” Ondaatje alludes to the contradictory nature of articulation in the face of atrocity:

There is my fear  
of no words of  
falling without words  
over and over of  
mouthing the silence

.....  
The Ghurkas in Malaya  
cut the tongues of mules  
so they were silent beasts of burden  
in enemy territories  
after such cruelty what could they speak of anyway (*Rat Jelly* 68-69)

Here again we see evidence not of outrage against such cruelty but rather a despairing acceptance of the inability of language to incorporate, or even resolve, such inexcusable brutality. In his description of a similar act of animal cruelty in Nadine Gordimer’s “Burger’s Daughter” (1979), Coetzee says, “The spectacle comes from the inner reaches of Dante’s hell, beyond the scope of morality” (“Dark Chamber” 364) and such a sense of moribund morality is certainly evident in Ondaatje’s depiction of these mutilated mules.

What remain paramount in Ondaatje’s texts, says Bok, are the very dangers inherent in the glamourisation of such violence: “[S]uch aesthetically rendered violence . . . raises unsettling questions about the social ramifications of violence in literature – for within the aesthetic celebration of brutality lies the potential for

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literary tropes of atrocity and silence, his focus in this book can also be seen as the silence of the disempowered, the non-partisan victim of sanctioned – be it by a rebel group or a government army – violence),

desensitization to brutality” (110). In *Anil's Ghost* a framework of non-description and non-speech protects the author from any such charges. According to Bok, Ondaatje regards this kind of “inward withdrawal into silence” as the “ultimate act of violence against society, perhaps because such aphasia represents a deliberate abandonment of language, the very means by which socialization is ever possible” (122). Rather than abandoning language, however, Ondaatje expresses a postmodern concern with the fracture between the signified and the signifier – he writes, yet, like Coetzee and Irving, he describes the unrepresentability of his subject, so returning his attention and the attention of the reader to the processes of literature and the challenge posed by historic atrocity to the art of the novelist. Ondaatje’s “artistic aphasia” stems therefore not from “an emotional pain harsh enough to silence the voice or a creative insight too profound to be expressed in words” (Bok 113) but from an appreciation of the chasm between language and subject – a chasm that has manifested itself in postmodern thought as literature struggles to find alternative means to allude to past acts of barbarity:

In challenging the seamless quality of the history/fiction (or world/art) join implied by realist narrative, postmodern fiction does not, however, disconnect itself from history of the world. It foregrounds and thus contests the conventionality and unacknowledged ideology of that assumption of seamlessness and asks its readers to question the processes by which we represent our selves and our world to ourselves and to become aware of the means by which we *make* sense of and *construct* order out of experience in our particular culture. We cannot avoid representation. We can try to avoid fixing our notion of it and assuming it to be transhistorical and transcultural. (Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism* 53-54)

Anil’s job in Sri Lanka is to try to rescue a particular “experience” – that of Government-sanctioned murder – from obscurity and so enable public recognition, memorialisation and, perhaps, justice. In attempting this mission she discovers that the most convincing and inviolable truth is revealed not by way of direct authorial description but by way of hidden carvings, censored photographs and unmarked graves. While people are kidnapped, tortured or killed, it is the images found on cave walls by Sarath and old Palipana that present an unthreatening yet irrefutable account of Sri Lanka’s pain: “Half the world, it felt, was being buried, the truth hidden by fear, while the past revealed itself in the light of a burning rhododendron bush” (156). This almost biblical illumination of truth is also evident in the environment within which the identity of the skeleton, dubbed Sailor, is sought. Sarath, Anil and Ananda (a local mineworker and once-celebrated artist) undertake the attempted reconstruction of the face of the dead man in an abandoned *walawwa* or house in the jungle, itself the ruins of an ancient monastery, far away from the eyes of officialdom. They work in silence; there is no communication with the outside world. As Ananda begins on the throat of the clay reconstruction there is a strong sense of a ritualistic confrontation with history, fear and truth. Anil remembers the words of a previous

teacher – “One village can speak for many villages. One victim can speak for many victims” (176) – yet she learns from Sarath, Palipana and Ananda to search for that truth in silence, away from the danger of Government duplicity and the impatience or the blundering self-righteousness of western interference. Just as Anil must, eventually, suffer the humiliating public denial of her authority by Sarath, so she learns, as Sarath has, that the truth must be uncovered in silence, almost in the dark. The denouement of *Anil’s Ghost*, in which Sailor’s remains are secreted back to Anil away from the suspicious eyes of officialdom, reflects this careful concealment of truth, not just in order to avoid the danger implicit in public exposure but also to prevent the truth from sliding back into forgotten history and mythology.

Throughout this book the bodily forms that can stand as testimony to torture – traumatised Lakma and the murdered Sailor – are divorced from voice and individuality. The truth behind recently murdered Sri Lankans such as Sailor is shrouded in the silence of death, the fear of witnesses and the anonymity of secretive burials, yet, while these bodies are devoid of voice, they are capable of providing irrevocable evidence of historic barbarity. As Clair says, the lifeless body can be perceived as “a signifier, an articulation of the fear, the hatred, the frustration, and the loathing that culminated in . . . group murder” (16) and in *Anil’s Ghost* the attention of all the characters is ultimately focused on the unspeaking, unnamed, unmoving yet unavoidable body of Sailor as the sole vehicle for inarguable truth. As Foster explains, in contemporary culture:

truth resides in the traumatic or abject subject, in the diseased or damaged body. To be sure, this body is the evidentiary basis of important witnessings to truth, of necessary testimonials against power . . . . If there is a subject of history for the cult of abjection at all, it is not the Worker, the Woman, or the Person of Color, but the Corpse. This not only a politics of difference pushed to indifference; it is a politics of alterity pushed to nihility. (166)

Certainly, the silence of the mute characters studied here points to a nihility found in its most extreme form in the utter and irreversible silence of death.

Zulaika argues that silence and secrecy “are widely used as markers showing that we are approaching a sacred site” while also asking whether “an anthropologist [can] be silent when confronted with the injustices of the world we live in” (105). Ondaatje similarly uses sacred sites such as the abandoned *walawwa* and the burning bush through which to uncover the injustices of state-sanctioned violence in Sri Lanka. In opposition to any notions of divine revelation and salvation associated with such sites, however, he places the dead and mutilated body of the as-yet unidentified Sailor at the very heart of these sites. Is it possible to witness in or by silence? Through Sailor and the slow process of identification Ondaatje shows that without doubt it is, and that the undeniable horror of a visible corpse may be the only way for Anil – and Ondaatje – to prove state-sanctioned murder. Antoinette Burton, evoking Yeats’s “foul rag and bone shop of the heart” from “The Circus

Animals' Desertion," notes that "What is left in the wake of Auschwitz, Vietnam, Srebrenica, Ayodhya, Colombo, Basra, 9/11, and Tora Bora is, effectively, the detritus of history's fragments and shards, ashes and dust, rag and bone. From these unspeakable remnants forensic scientists have laboured to extract the kinds of testimony that living witnesses often cannot" (39). In *Anil's Ghost* Ondaatje joins those scientists in rifling through such detritus, refusing the novelistic convention of direct explication and ignoring the impulse to camouflage the physicality of atrocity with the more comfortable veil of intellectuality.

Describing the genre of Holocaust writing, Lang says that the imagination is set "within the limits of history – and it is constrained there by moral, not aesthetic and not simply historical conditions; they thus join, and for the same reason, other minor genres like the fable or the allegory" ("Holocaust Genres" 26). This definition reiterates the idea of history as a receptacle for truth, not only in that certain events should be discussed only within an historical context, but also in that to venture too far into the realm of the imagination would be, as Barton in *Foe* has to remind herself on more than one occasion, a travesty of historical imperatives and the human suffering that remains a fundamental part of such events. Invention, rooted in historical fact, risks a form of literary trespass that can be seen as a further act of violation of real human pain – a disturbing conflation of art or entertainment with non-fictitious, human horror. Yet within such expectations there remains another risk, a danger indicated by the more distant histories of many of the books studied here – that is, as fewer survivors are left to tell their stories, a restriction on artistic responses to events such as the Holocaust may result in the relegation of truth into the dark basement of history or the less urgent realm of mythology where it will fade into a pastness that exerts no influence, warning or threat on the present. To paraphrase Coetzee again, how much more bearable the newscasts will then become ("Dark Chamber" 361).

#### **"A small accepting 'o'": accepted codes of silence**

The problem of verbalising pain (and for this study I include trauma in the definition of pain) "originates much less in the inflexibility of any one language or in the shyness of any one culture than in the utter rigidity of pain itself: its resistance to language is not simply one of its incidental or accidental attributes but is essential to what it is" (Scarry 5). Within the expression of truth through silence, however, there are instances in which cultural protocols or social norms do have a bearing on the validity or appropriateness of reticence. This is particularly evident in black American writing in which silence, while serving as a trope for alienation, also puts the onus on others to share the burden of revelation. Such a reliance on a communal voice to express an individual's story, says Sheila Hassel Hughes, does not undermine the role of the protagonist – such a conclusion, she says, rests upon "the assumption that an individualized speech mode is itself constitutive of power. And this depends upon a particular conception of power as autonomous, individualistic and self-assertive" (107). Hughes argues that in certain cultures (she focuses on native North American culture) it is through many voices, moving between or among speakers, that authority is constituted. If one person is too

damaged or too traumatised to speak, the very fact that another is able to speak on their behalf helps to reinstate the victim's sense of autonomy in the same way that in legal situations the lawyer "speaks *on behalf* of another person (the plaintiff) and attempts to communicate the reality of that person's physical pain to people who are not themselves in pain (the jurors)" (Scarry 10). Certainly, in many of Morrison's books the silence of a central character is seen as an acceptable part of story and explanation, where the burden of explication is assumed by friends and family. This form of disclosure has correlations with the call-and-response alternation of African, and African American, religion, music and street vernacular in which the leader (the preacher or lead vocalist) sings one verse and the chorus (the congregation or responding vocalist) answers him or her with another verse. This idea, of course, is stymied in postcolonial discourse in which, as Coetzee discusses at length, the right of one person to speak on behalf of another is questioned. As Barton explains to Foe, "The story of Friday's tongue is a story unable to be told, or unable to be told by me" (118) and throughout the narrative no one is found capable of speaking on behalf of the former slave – Cruso and Friday's former shipmates are dead and neither Barton nor Foe have the right or the knowledge to stitch together an acceptable story.

Writing in 1956, the literary critic Lawrence McCaffrey describes Ireland as a "tight little community with a thin skin and an exaggerated and often irrational patriotism that demands silence on issues that might bruise its feelings, even if silence means the continuation of serious abuses" (28). Such a silence, he says, is a common trope in post-revolutionary Irish literature, endorsed as it is by clerical conformity and ready censorship. The omnipresent silence in Deane's tragedy translates this national tendency into a domestic landscape as both the mother and her increasingly estranged son are burdened by the unspeakability of the family secret and the shared shame of *knowing*.

In *Obasan* Joy Kogawa describes the experience of those Japanese Canadians during World War II who were interned in work camps: "We are the silences that speak from the stone. We are the despised, rendered voiceless, stripped of car, radio, camera, and every means of communication . . . . We are the Issei and the Nisei and the Sansei, the Japanese Canadians. We disappear into the future undemanding as dew" (132). This communal voicelessness is personified by Naomi's aunt Obasan with her recurring lapses into silence that render her increasingly invisible, increasingly stone-like: "Obasan rubs her eyes and tries to speak but the thick saliva coats her throat. Her round dry mouth is open. A small accepting 'o'" (295). The childish entreaty of this "small accepting 'o'" combined with the physical description of her speechlessness acts as a powerful metaphor for the fearful, non-combative response that is typified by Obasan's voicelessness. Yet, as the voice drowns in the thick coat of saliva and the mouth adopts the disturbing shape of the supplicant, it also presents a strangely inhuman image as her adopted home country suddenly and inhumanely ostracises her and her people with a shocking disregard for past alliances forged within communities and neighbourhoods.

In this novel Kogawa dramatises the conflict between silence as a culturally specific reticence on the one hand, and as a threat to the dissemination of information on the other. Young Naomi stands between these two

conflicting viewpoints. Her Aunt Emily, an active campaigner for an apology and redress by the Canadian Government to Japanese Canadians, argues vehemently that this wartime discrimination is now a part of their cultural history and must not be assigned to a forgotten past. Emily stresses the importance of an uninterrupted voice to keep their story alive: “You have to remember. . . . You are your history. If you cut it off you’re an amputee. Don’t deny the past. Remember everything. If you’re bitter, be bitter. Cry it out! Scream! Denial is gangrene!” (60). But for Naomi and Obasan the wartime animosity of Canadians against fellow Canadians lies beyond understanding and thus beyond meaningful articulation. While the crimes enacted upon the bodies of Friday and Hanna taken place away from western eyes – in a slave ship, on an uninhabited island, in the desert, in an abandoned convent and in the inescapable confines of a fast-moving train – Kogawa centres her story within Vancouver, a sophisticated city in which suddenly a common language is used to denigrate those of Japanese ancestry: “Canadian-born citizens are dubbed ‘enemy aliens’; prison camps are dressed up as ‘Interior Housing Projects’” (Cheung 117). As Morrison said in her Nobel Lecture, “oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence” (1993) and in *Obasan* Aunt Emily describes how none “escaped the naming, we were defined and identified by the way we were seen” (139). In a newspaper in British Columbia the Japanese Canadians are described as “‘a stench in the nostrils of the people of Canada’” (139-40), “Gimpy Jap[s]” (182), “Enemy aliens” (110) – dehumanising epithets that have their correlation in the language employed in Nazi Germany against the Jews.

For Naomi, Obasan’s silence is a barricade behind which she is protected from the need, and presumably the desire, to respond to such insults: “She does not dance to the multicultural piper’s tune or respond to the racist’s slur. She remains in a silent territory, defined by her serving hands” (271). As curfew time approaches, the Japanese Canadians return to their homes “like furtive animals” (105), carrying the unfamiliar burden of Otherness on their collective shoulders. Even the recurring and seemingly polite question by non-Japanese visitors to Obasan’s house, “Have you been back to Japan?” (an “icebreaker” questions that creates “an awareness of ice” [271]) alienates Obasan and Naomi further from the non-Japanese Canadians, casually drawing attention to a chasm that previously, Kogawa suggests, did not exist.

Throughout the book Naomi and Obasan remain united in their unspoken commitment not to articulate their protest against the confiscation of property, the internment of many Japanese Canadians in the Canadian interior and even the threat of deportation. Introducing her book, Kogawa describes the sheer scale of the challenge facing the recorder of such acts: “There is a silence that cannot speak. There is a silence that will not speak. Beneath the grass the speaking dreams and beneath the dreams is a sensate sea. The speech that frees comes forth from that amniotic deep. To attend to its voice, I can hear it say, is to embrace its absence. But I fail the task. The word is stone. I admit it” (n. pag.). Within the mythic associations of “speaking dreams” and the “sensate sea” silence sits comfortably – just as it does in Friday’s “slow stream” flowing through his body and Paul D’s “ocean-deep place” in *Beloved*.

The final chapters in *Obasan* quote from a real memorandum sent by the Co-operative Committee on Japanese Canadians to the Canadian Government in 1946. In this document the proposed – but later rescinded – deportation of Canadian citizens is decried as “grave injustice and inhumanity to innocent persons” and incorporating “the methods of Naziism” (299-300). This official and unequivocal extract is supported by Kogawa’s more poetic emanation of grief, a mourning song through which silence “can now honor private memories” (Teleky 212). The official transcript marks a shift from the story of a specific family to a wider, political account of Canada’s policy towards those of Japanese heritage during World War II – a similar device to the framing mechanism used in *The Other Side of Silence*. Teleky argues that the inclusion of this transcript suggests that “writing is a collective act, an act that builds on the attempts of other writers to transform silence. Kogawa can allow the words of other writers . . . to speak for her and to end her book because she has found her own ‘hidden voice’ in the act of writing *Obasan*” (212-13). Yet *Obasan* and Naomi’s hidden voices are not so successfully articulated; while the quoted letter adds authenticity to the plot of *Obasan* – speaking “on behalf of” the victims of Canada’s wartime policy on citizens of Japanese heritage – the effects of such proposed policies remain like an irreconcilable shadow behind the bland officialese of the memorandum.

For Steiner, silence works as an active forgetting, a necessary precursor to beginning a new life. In describing the birth of Israel he says, “Hope and will to action spring from the capacity of the human mind to forget, from the instinct of necessary oblivion” (167). While Steiner has long argued that the fact of Auschwitz creates serious challenges to the literary writer, this statement suggests not only the desirability of silence but also its necessity – for him, as with many characters in the novels studied in this investigation, hope lies only in such active forgetting. Yet it is this very eventuality that “word warrior” Aunt Emily rails against, and that even Naomi recognises as a flawed response to injustice. While on the one hand she tries to bury her memories of her pre-war childhood in Vancouver – “It does not bear remembering. None of this bears remembering” (60) – she is also aware that silence suffocates the truth, preventing both demands for justice and the right to grieve: “Gentle Mother, we were lost together in our silences. Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction” (291).

While the reticence in *Obasan* as practised by Naomi and Obasan is a reflection of the inexplicable inhumanity – or, more accurately, the untenable *humanity* – of a country turning on its own people, it is also presented as a legacy of Japanese culture with its stereotypical profile of the “submissive Oriental” (Cheung 114). Just as Friday’s silence is regarded by Barton as indicative of a childlike dullness of spirit or animal ignorance, throughout *Obasan* the traditional Japanese use of silence as a form of respect and/or alertness is tainted by western assumptions of guilt or a despicable meekness. While the interned Japanese Canadians used silence to protect their children from the truth of the injustices done to them, this very refusal to talk and protest was, to the dominant culture, symptomatic of a cultural passivity and weakness and, as King-Kok Cheung notes, “encouraged open season on them” (119). Silence in English-speaking societies is often seen as the opposite of language or expression – as Crapanzano notes, “The Americans’ is a wordy aesthetic: the pause, the gap, silence



are to be filled” (50). In Japanese and Chinese traditions, however, silence is antonymous to noise, motion and commotion. Naomi’s inability to scream out her protest, notes Cheung (119), is a result of her schooling in the protective and stoic silence of the Issei (the first or immigrant generation of Japanese Canadians). In western society it may be considered braver to speak out, to protest and champion the cause of the underdog – certainly, Naomi’s Aunt Emily battles not only to pronounce the truth loudly and publicly but also, perhaps, to counter the stereotype of the “submissive Oriental”. In the true fashion of the Issei, however, courage is measured by self-control and emotional reticence; “their (traditional) aesthetic which is deeply rooted in their religious outlook, stresses the interval, the gap, the silence, *the between*” (Crapanzano 51). Language in *Obasan* thus has two roles: it can liberate and heal, “but it can also distort and hurt; and while silence may smother and obliterate, it can also minister, soothe and communicate” (Cheung 114).

While speechlessness offers a ready avenue for non-confrontation in times of strife, it can also signify a collective shame by which the victim or victims are dishonoured by the very state of victimhood. Aunt Emily subscribes to this western interpretation of speechlessness in her belief that silence suggests, if not guilt, at least passive suffering – “What a bunch of sheep we were. Polite. Meek. All the way up the slaughterhouse ramp” (45). But for Naomi silence symbolises not only compliance but also a reassuring innocence. On her father’s return she does not need to tell him all their sufferings under the Canadian Government’s wartime policies; rather she swims into a long and speechless embrace, “quiet as the moon, quiet as the snow falling, quiet as the white light from the stars. Into this I fall and fall and fall, swaying safe as a feather” (202). Naomi learns the power of Obasan’s silence, despairing at those who did not understand that the avenues of speech are “the avenues of silence. To hear my mother, to attend her speech, to attend the sound of stone [one] must first become silent” (274). It is this covering of silence that the children cling to, that the parents provide dutifully and that non-Japanese Canadians regard as suspicious. These conflicting views are overshadowed by the silence of Naomi’s missing mother – a silence we later understand to be part of a generational attempt to hide the painful truth of the bombing of Nagasaki from the children: “The memories were drowned in a whirlpool of protective silence. Everywhere I could hear the adults whispering, ‘Kodomo no tame. For the sake of the children . . .’ Calmness was maintained” (26).

Yet, while Naomi clings to the security of not asking, not knowing or having to confront her knowing, she realises that, in silencing that truth of the death of her mother and other family members in the nuclear attack on Nagasaki, her entire family remains locked in a wordlessness that limits the potential for positive human interaction and the eventual working through of that grief. Discussing the 1959 film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, Kyo Maclear describes the film’s evocative gestures “toward the unknowable, toward sites and sights that exceed our immediate frames of reference. These are events that dash efforts to gain, hold, grasp, and enclose understanding. Unfathomable are the words: enemy, atrocity, destruction” (238). If conventional films about Hiroshima are based on the view “that there is an intact history out there waiting to be lured into vision and

spoken as pure meaning” (Maclear 239), Kogawa in her narrative re-enacts the lack of meaning, the lack of “intact history”, that saw Naomi’s family, admittedly unwittingly, going to their death. In doing so she ensures that Canada’s policy of internment continues to pierce the conscience of the nation and to defy the assumption of narrative closure, in much the same way that the enduringly mute figure of Friday ensures that slavery is recognised as an ongoing challenge to the collective memory and self-regard of the West.

Modern psychology and ancient religion tend to agree that speech – be it the Freud/Lacan notion of the “talking cure” or the religious ritual of confession – is therapeutic, yet it is only too believable to consider a child such as Naomi in *Obasan*, Ritie in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Deane’s young narrator being so terrified of the harm his or her words can do to those around them that they actively resist such communication. The innocence of the young is frequently used as a touchstone by which to measure the barbarity of acts of terror.<sup>3</sup> Ignorant of the ways of exploiting truth, children can be seen as guileless witnesses, their very youth reiterating their lack of culpability in contrast to the manipulated or manipulating lines of an adult trained in the art of duplicity or tact. The silencing of children’s voices thus serves as a violation of both truth and vulnerable youth. Andrea Reiter explains how many memories of concentration camps during the Holocaust are reported through the straightforward and unsentimental viewpoint of children “as if the authors could not afford self-pity. They needed to protect their psychological balance by spelling out even the most horrific experiences in ironic detachment, by detailed account or qualified by a theoretical frame” (90). As Langer says, “In most literature of atrocity, the specific forces behind the suffering of the victims are as anonymous as they themselves are destined to become; and the choice of children as victims compounds the anonymity (because of the even more limited comprehension of the children) and intensifies the atmosphere of intimidation” (*Literary Imagination* 164). While Deane’s narrator is aware of the facts of Eddie’s death, this awareness is set, as it is in Kogawa’s *Obasan*, within a large, amorphous landscape of silence and fear. As the boy walks alongside his father we are told, “I knew then he was going to tell me something terrible some day, and, in sudden fright, didn’t want him to; keep your secrets, I said to him inside my closed mouth, keep your secrets and I won’t mind” (46) – a response not unlike Barton’s underlying fear of the sounds or truths Friday might utter if he were suddenly able to speak. In Deane’s novel the young narrator explains, “So broken was my father’s family that it felt to me like a catastrophe you could live with only if you kept quiet” (42) and with all the typical egocentricity of childhood the young narrator assumes the entire responsibility for shielding his family from the truth of Eddie’s murder. When he first learns that Eddie’s execution was ordered by his grandfather, the young narrator immediately realises the devastating impact that the uttered truth would have on his relationship with the rest of his family: “I

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<sup>3</sup> As a psychological condition selective mutism is rare, affecting less than one percent of school age children and a far smaller number of adults. Its onset generally occurs during preschool or primary school years and it is deemed to be attributed to social anxiety (see Hornby). Further studies have argued that SM is a symptom of specific anxiety disorders including social phobia, separation anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (see Anstendig).

left him and went straight home, home, where I could never talk to my father or my mother properly again” (126). The boy’s father confides in his son in a church, a place of historically sanctified silence and the washing away of sin, in a macabre reversal of the Catholic confessional with its association of divine forgiveness, yet the horror of this family secret is the utter lack of potential for forgiveness or even disclosure. Rather than release, the father’s confession offers only the promise of silence – an albatross hung around the neck of the young. As Stafford writes, “Only the knowledge of terror is more awful than its enactment. The more terrible the event the more rigid the sanctions against its representation” (122). The boy’s response to this newfound knowledge is that of a young child, slamming his hands to his ears to protect himself from the truth: “‘Daddy,’ I said internally, ‘I know it’s too late but go back a few minutes, back into the church and the rain and say nothing. Never say, never say’” (134). His childish belief – that utterance would somehow substantiate a truth that need not be substantiated, that would be better, in fact, if left in the inchoate realm of the unnamed – assumes that, if left unuttered, the truth will cause no harm: no one will be hurt, no one will be blamed, a peace, however uneasy, will prevail.

For many of these characters, both adults and children, silence thus acts as a storehouse of terrible consequences, one to be kept locked not only by the mute witnesses of civil crime but also by those who do not wish to hear or acknowledge a truth that may shock, that may require action or that may leave them exposed to retribution. While speaking characters bemoan these mute figures – Friday in *Foe*, Ritie in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Pallas in *Paradise* are all chastised either verbally or physically for their speechlessness – many of these authors reveal a considered deliberation on behalf of the victims and witnesses as to whether they should speak out or not. Barton tells Foe that Friday’s story is “properly not a story but a puzzle or hole in the narrative (I picture it as a button-hole, carefully cross-stitched around but empty, waiting for the button)” (121) and throughout the book both she and Foe consider the various forms this “button” may take.

### **“The forlorn whoops of a stray hyena” – the solitude of silence**

Each of the mute victims of pain or trauma studied in this chapter is representative of disenfranchised cultures or sub-cultures targetted or alienated on the grounds of gender, ethnicity or age. In *Foe* Friday is the anonymous face of the tribe of Africans taken into slavery; in *Obasan* Naomi and her aunt are emblematic of ostracised Japanese-Canadians during World War II; in *The Other Side of Silence* Hanna’s subjugation is based on gender and social standing – she is an orphan, she is not well-educated, she is poor and she is a woman in a male-dominated colonial regime aligned to the silenced voices of the colonised – or slaughtered – tribespeople. As such, the story she could tell is one of social prejudice and sexual slavery, as well as the brutal colonisation of Namibia and the near annihilation of the Herero tribe – an event now regarded as the century’s first genocide. Yet her very silence demonstrates the extent of her subjugation. As the anonymous narrator trying to unearth

Hanna's story explains, in *Frauenstein* there is only silence, a silence "too deep even for terror, too everywhere, and marked only, at night, by the scurrilous laughter of jackals, the forlorn whoops of a stray hyena" (3).

In *Disgrace*, Lucy's decision not to report her rape at the hands of black South Africans indicates a sense of compensation on behalf of the orchestrators of apartheid, while also reflecting the difficulty in addressing a crime that clearly falls outside the intent of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up in 1995 under the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act to give a voice to those (black) victims of apartheid at the hands of the (white) oppressors. As Jason Cowley says, Lucy's reluctance to speak out "mimics that of the wider inarticulacy of the once-oppressed majority in South Africa. . . . In [Lucy's] own mind, what has occurred is bound up with the wider historical guilt of whites in South Africa; this is her burden as a white woman" (1999).

Against a backdrop of social or political discrimination these single mute figures represent the unspoken stories of a whole group – a voicelessness endorsed by a dominant public reluctant to hear such stories of atrocity. Divorced from the normal incursions into thought and character that are allowed by speech or shared silence, these characters can be seen as bearers of their tribe's culpability – in this case a culpability for the crime of racial domination and civil strife. In Huggan's analysis the use of such instances of silence represents the bonding defiance of a group or family's refusal to enlist in the articulation of the power group, yet many of these mute characters, including Friday and the nameless narrator in Deane's *Reading in the Dark*, are denied any such communal bonding. While silence may indicate an act of communal disengagement from the aggressor group and its language – and trauma, in Alexander's analysis, may be the outcome of a collective decision to define events as such – in the incidents of reclusive silence studied here the mute figure tends to stand alone. Most of the characters covered in this study are outcasts, defined by their inviolate memories of pain or terror as typified by Friday, dancing in Foe's English kitchen, his eyes closed, his soul "more in Africa than in Newington" (98), or the boy's mother in *Reading in the Dark*, standing in mute shame at the top of the empty stairwell, a tragic symbol for Ireland's pain. In *The Other Side of Silence* Hanna X barely exists outside the experience of her brutal attack, and Sailor and even twelve-year-old Lakma in *Anil's Ghost* are identified purely in terms of the incident that caused his death and Lakma's withdrawal into silence. Even Obasan in Kogawa's book is defined largely by what she chooses not to explain. In "Into the Dark Chamber" Coetzee warns against reading particular episodes of brutality "in a narrowly symbolic way" (367) and certainly, despite their often abbreviated characterisation, these mute figures warrant reader excavation for individuality. The scope of this individuality, however, is deliberately limited both by the experience of pain and by their position outside the norms of how a society wishes to portray itself.

If many of these texts are concerned with how we can witness another's pain, then central to the solution to this problem is this figure of muteness defying the literary trope of interiority and social discourse, refusing to disappear into the dust of history and emerging instead as a figure of epic proportions, defined by a level of pain that is conveyed through the physical body rather than the articulating voice. In this regard these characters are

allegorical figures, archetypal sufferers denied both the individuality relayed in fiction primarily through speech and conversation, as well as the security and righteousness of group identification, resisting intrusion by the other characters and, in some cases, by the reader as they provide the physical evidence – they *are* the physical evidence – of the unspeakable victimisation of a people or tribe.

Traditionally, says Gitzen, “the traveler is often a lonesome figure” (3) and the silence of these characters serves to consolidate their withdrawal or exclusion from humankind, a phenomenon promoted by the aggressors, yet also accepted both by the victims as they seek the anonymity of invisibility and by the contemporary author in deliberating the ethics of full literary disclosure and the limits of narrative authority. Such concerns, says Holton, range from “a questioning of the various aspects of the art of narration to a wholesale skepticism towards the very possibility of adequate narrative representation given its structural tendency to exclude the heterogeneous” (222). The authority of the postcolonial speaker over the past four decades has been exposed as standing on a frail, arbitrary and often questionable moral position of cultural monopoly. If we are, as Mark Currie suggests, narrative animals, or “*homo fabulans* – the tellers and interpreters of narrative” (2), then, as the communality of this species becomes fractured through acts of barbarity, so too the accepted tools of narration have had to evolve in their endeavour to portray a more multifarious experience.

Defining a key concern for the postcolonial writer, Huggan says that the “articulation of a violent history of dispossession and deprivation . . . must be told in *another way*” (12). If we are to avoid what Langer describes as “the aesthetic problem of reconciling normalcy with horror (*Literary Imagination* xii), then silence can be seen as providing one of a range of alternative, non-verbal codes (including music, Huggan argues) which subvert and/or replace those earlier, over-determined narratives of colonial encounter in which the word is recognised to have played a crucial role in supporting colonial power. In *Foe*, Friday’s silence, like his dancing and his incomprehensible rituals, not only constitutes an alternative language, but also works to undermine the authority of oral language and to challenge the supremacy of those like Barton – and Foe – who “have arrogated that authority to themselves” (Huggan 18). It also challenges the authority of any one language to act as the main vehicle for narration in cross-cultural texts – as Attridge says, even those who seek to speak out against oppression “have to conform to the dominant language in order to be heard in the places where power is concentrated” (86). Even the non-verbal codes of silence and music:

are themselves subject to a verbal narrative which testifies to the continuing dominance of the *word* and of the societies or social groups that control it. Silence and music remain subject to the word then, but if they cannot escape its controlling agency they can at least suggest an alternative framework within which a history not just of verbal, but of physical and mental subjection can be expressed and imaginatively transformed. (Huggan 21)

This analysis casts new light on the many non-verbal means of communication seen in the postcolonial texts studied here: Friday in *Foe* dances and plays his flute and undertakes mysterious ritualistic offerings to the dead; Palipana in *Anil's Ghost* and the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* read obscure inscriptions from the past; even Simon in *the bone people* sings strange, bird-like songs deep into his driftwood constructions. In each of these situations the text offers alternative codes to “subvert and/or replace those earlier, over-determined narratives of colonial encounter in which the word is recognized to have played a crucial role in the production and maintenance of colonial hierarchies of power” (Huggan 13).

Apart from the characters physically incapable of speech – Friday, Hanna X, Ellen James (and the Ellen Jamesians) – the tension in these unuttered experiences lies in the constant threat of imminent confession and the human need to return to the communality of “normal” discourse. In *Reading in the Dark* the young narrator yearns to break the stranglehold that the unsaid has on his family and on his own life. On more than one occasion he decides to tell his mother what he knows – that it was not Eddie who had betrayed his people, that her father had had the wrong man killed – but “everytime I started my courage failed. I thought if I could just get going I’d get through it all. Anything might happen. Maybe she would put her hands over her ears and start crying. Or worse. But I had to say I know. The truth was swollen inside me” (194). In the end, Deane’s narrator takes a more secretive route to confession. Like the mother in *Unless* and Melinda in *Speak*, anonymously inscribing their pain on the walls of the women’s toilets, Deane’s narrator does disclose the truth but in a manner that severely restricts its impact – he speaks in Irish, a language understood in this family only by him and his mother: “[My father] just nodded and smiled and said it sounded wonderful. My mother had listened carefully. I knew she knew what I was doing” (194).

According to Bok, Ondaatje, in his reliance on secret, limited, unspoken or anonymous transmissions of information, similarly recognises that “the primacy of silence can be defied via graffiti; such writing can be more than an autotelic act of violent transgression; such writing can also be a revolutionary statement of communal solidarity” (118); yet in these instances it also removes the responsibility for further explanation from the individual. Whether in fear of those who wish to oppress freedom of speech (as in *Anil's Ghost*) or in an attempt to exorcise the information while also limiting the possible effects of public exposure (as in *Unless* or *Reading in the Dark*), such muted or anonymous representations express information while simultaneously reducing its impact.

In describing twentieth-century American abstract expressionism, Bernstein claims that the “unfinished” nature of such art, with its visible brush strokes and self-conscious paint, was largely due to the fact that a “finished” work was considered too easy, representing “an undesirable claim for closure, an unearned synthesis of the artist, his materials, and the world” (*Tale of the Tribe* 131). In using a mute character as the holder of seemingly inexplicable and terrifying information, these authors – Coetzee, Morrison, Brink, Deane, Kogawa

and Ondaatje – resist the inappropriate reassurance of closure and an aesthetic norm that, as Langer says, would suggest that the:

inconceivable fate of the victims appears to have had some sense after all, that a transfiguration occurs, that some of the horror of the event is removed. The prospect of art denying what it seeks to affirm (the hideous chaos of dehumanization . . .) raises a spectre of paradox for the critic, the reader, and the artist himself, that is not easily circumvented. (*Literary Imagination* 2).

Just as the characters in *Foe*, *Reading in the Dark* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* are incapable of resolving or even understanding the event in question, so too whole nations torn apart by civil strife are unable to pinpoint an end date for atrocity. The pain continues, held most tellingly in the unutterable memories of the victims and witnesses. If the epic was, as Ezra Pound claimed, “the speech of a nation through the mouth of one person” (qtd. in Bernstein, *Tale of the Tribe* 18), then how acutely speaks the silence of that one person, a signifier for the unthinkable (in)humanity that breaches the trust held within – and which to a certain extent defines – the tribes of postmodernity.

## 3

**“Faces split by greasepaint grins”: the rendering of war**

At grief so deep the tongue must wag in vain;  
 the language of our sense and memory  
 lacks the vocabulary of such pain  
 – Dante’s *Inferno* (qtd. in Patterson 29)

During the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries aesthetic representations of war stumbled under the weight of exponential increases in fatality rates. From the trenches of World War I to the shock of 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq the extent of horror and degradation repeatedly failed to conform to pre-1914 notions of glorious battle and heroic endeavour. With the “virtual self-extinction of the European imperium in the trenches of World War I” (Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions* 7), neither the lofty epic of the past nor the traditional novel with its strong focus on interiority and individual experience seemed capable of explaining the unprecedented conflict that produced death and suffering on such a scale. The events of this war have been frequently described as lying outside the current norms of narrative; certainly, they “could no longer be integrated in traditional patterns of creating meaning through ideals of heroism and identification with the nation” (Hüppauf 2). Or, as Henry James wrote in *The New York Times* in 1915, “‘The war has used up words; they have weakened, they have deteriorated’” (qtd. in Sontag 22).

The literary representation of World War I demanded new codes and techniques to depict the very specific violence of this war, not as a blip on a progressively humane social trajectory as was expected for the new century, but as a seemingly irreversible descent into widespread death, disease and depraved living conditions that appeared to threaten any coherent portrayal of human values, of humanity itself.

The dramatic escalation of death produced by World War I, the “war to end all wars”, and the fundamentally bizarre nature of trench warfare certainly made absurd the Enlightenment idea of mankind’s steady moral progress. Rather it was, as Paul Fussell says, a “hideous embarrassment to the prevailing Meliorist myth which had dominated the public consciousness for a century. It reversed the idea of progress” (8). Henry James summed up this sudden deviation from such progress in a letter to Howard Sturgis in 1914:



The plunge of civilization into this abyss of blood and darkness . . . is a thing that so gives away the whole long age during which we have supposed the world to be, with whatever abatement, gradually bettering, that to have to take it all now for what the treacherous years were all the while really making for and *meaning* is too tragic for any words. (qtd. in Lubbock 384)

One of the results of this tragedy, explains Bernard Hüppauf, is the perception of violence as “a deplorable digression from [the civilised world’s] ‘true’ constitution” (10). The danger of this perception, in which violence is portrayed as “a predicament of a past governed by prejudice, irrationalism and arbitrary power relations and . . . an illegitimate product of modernity” (12), is that it denies the possibility of violence as being “inextricably intertwined with modernity”. It seems doubtful, Hüppauf says, whether:

the specific violence of the modern world can adequately be comprehended as long as an essentialist position is being maintained and identifiable nations, groups, or individuals are being defined as the respective agents of violence, whereas anonymous structures and macro-scale conditions determining individual and group behavior are excluded from the construction of violence. (11)

While many World War I poets and authors were quick, says Fussell, to enlist myths, Biblical stories and folklore, as well as an assortment of jargon, euphemisms and unashamed sentiment, to valorise and romanticise their accounts of warfare (Britain especially, says Fussell, had a tendency towards heroic grandiosity in its portrayal of battle), the twentieth-century movements of surrealism, dada and, later, existentialism, did to varying degrees succeed in evoking the nightmarish irrationality of war and the fragility of the notion of violence as a digression from society’s “true constitution”. Certainly dada, with its more fractured and unpredictable use of language, effectively evoked the nihilism of World War I. Such attacks on conventional art were waged in relation to its “languages, institutions, and structures of meaning, expectation and reception” (Foster 16). Wartime reality *was* both disorderly and unpredictable; slaughter on such a massive scale *did* unsettle the assumptions implicit in newspaper pronouncements of “victory” and the clichéd descriptions of battle such as that used by Edward Liveing in his 1918 account of the attack on Gommecourt two years earlier: “‘Men not too badly wounded were chatting gaily’” (qtd. in Fussell 171). Avant-garde movements such as dada replicated this collapse of a binary order that had once bridged word with meaning in their use of chance, random selection and a certain flippancy in radical disregard for the traditional expectations of the creative artist.

The humane and orderly functions of language and artistic representation were further stretched by the seemingly unspeakable horror of World War II and the Holocaust (the role of silence within the genre of Holocaust writing will be studied in more detail in the next chapter). Even today the facts of the atrocities

committed in Europe during this time seem to defy such humanist terms as “understanding” and “meaning”. In his discussion of representations of the Holocaust, Frederick Hoffman describes the circumstances of violence as being so overwhelming “that it is impossible for any literature to comprehend it adequately. Most of the literature written since the Second World War’s conclusion seems to have come from a tacit consent to keep the fact of violence away from the center of such a concern” (287), so reiterating the opinion of George Steiner that the post-Holocaust history of the German language has been one of “dissimulation and deliberate forgetting” (Steiner 131). Hüppauf goes further. Both Auschwitz and Hiroshima, he says, signify:

a historical experience that gives rise to the problem of nihilism. Despite fundamental differences separating the two events, both demonstrate that under extreme conditions no ethical imperative will create an inhibition from making use of all means available, even of those leading to unlimited destruction. The memory of human beings who evaporated in a fraction of a second leaving behind nothing but shadows on walls has changed the image of history in a way not dissimilar to the memory of the reduction of men, women and children to moving objects of destruction in the extermination camps. (10)

In her Nobel Lecture in 1993 Toni Morrison describes the forces of censorship and manipulation that give rise to a language that deliberately eschews meaning or a sense of humanity, a language that thwarts the intellect and stalls conscience. In the fictitious land of her parable:

children have bitten off their tongues and use bullets instead to iterate the voice of speechlessness, of disabled and disabling language, of language adults have abandoned altogether as a device for grappling with meaning, providing guidance, or expressing love. But [the old woman in her story] knows tongue-suicide is not only the choice of children. It is common among the infantile heads of state and power merchants whose evacuated language leaves them with no access to what is left of their human instincts for they speak only to those who obey, or in order to force obedience. (Nobel Foundation, 7 Dec. 1993)

In the wake of such “tongue-suicide”, Morrison warns, there will remain only the “evacuated language” of despotism and the sound of further gunfire, an official language “smitheryed to sanction ignorance and preserve privilege . . . a suit of armor polished to shocking glitter, a husk from which the knight departed long ago. Yet there it is: dumb, predatory, sentimental. Exciting reverence in schoolchildren, proving shelter for despots, summoning false memories of stability, harmony among the public” (1993).

Natania Rosenfeld, in describing literary approaches to aestheticism in “an age of atrocities (351), refers to what art historian Mieke Bal describes as “doxa” – official or automatic interpretations that succeed in hiding the truth or stunting the imagination (she uses as an example the ruminating writer in Virginia Woolf’s 1921 short story *The Mark on the Wall*, who pulls herself up for daydreaming about old “automatic” fancies of knights in armour). “Such doxa,” Rosenfeld, writes, “keep us from discovering our own subjective truths; worse, they can be used to mask atrocity. The feudal romance of knights aestheticizes the violence knights do” (353). Morrison’s attack on the “evacuated language” of despotism reveals a similar understanding of the need, particularly among writers, to recognise and reject the obfuscating use of doxa, and to regard the linguistic lacunae that follow from such rejection as a closer approximation to truth than the “shocking glitter” of words that conceal, rather than reveal, reality. Such lacunae, argues Calvin Bedient argues, typify modernity. Referring to the “untidy sublime” of twentieth century literature, he claims that what is missing “is the very thing that impels it to be modern. Its insides, so to speak, cannot be brought to the surface and socially introduced. Yet somehow it makes them known, and this is the source of its ‘sublimity’” (100). Bedient refers to a primal repression, itself a “violent truth that we keep missing even in our innermost negotiations” (101), that makes an entire cult out of inadmissibility.

It can be argued that the voice of the writer is required to cast just and truthful light on the actions of despots and war criminals. As Robert David MacDonald says in his introduction to Kosinski’s *The Painted Bird* in 1970, “As the one man whose imagination should be capable of mastering such material, [the artist] is necessarily compelled to try to do so” (ix). But to undertake such a task presents substantial challenges. How does a society confronted by “the failure of the word in the face of the inhuman” (Steiner 71) portray the experience of war? We know war. We are familiar with the images, the sounds, the statistics. But can we imagine war, and, if we can, should we? If the rationality of structured vocabulary seems insufficient in the depiction of extreme violence, and if language has already been implicated in incitements to racial hatred, then the idea of putting one’s faith in that language in a bid to restore understanding, meaning and social well-being seems anachronistic at best. The challenge for the writer, then, is to accurately portray collective terror without reverting to Rosenfeld’s doxa or Morrison’s “evacuated language” of despotism, and without indulging in an act of aestheticisation that betrays the depth of trauma of the people involved. In using a figure that does not speak, the writers featured in this investigation avoid this sense of collusion or inappropriate glibness while also re-enacting the silence of the traumatic event itself. Focussing on an extreme example of the human potential to inflict pain, Elaine Scarry describes torture as an act that is, in its enactment as well as in its later representation, largely non-verbal: “To attach any name, any word, to the wilful infliction of this bodily agony is to make language and civilization participate in their own destruction” (43). In leaving such wilful inflictions of pain beyond the scope of direct articulation the novels studied here reiterate the actual experience of such pain while also drawing our attention to the challenge such experiences pose to the writer of fiction.

### “Spray of buttons, little white teeth”: the case for silence

Eva Hoffman<sup>4</sup> recounts the true story of two Cambodian women who migrated to California after fleeing the terror of the Khmer Rouge regime. A compilation of medical data found that they were just two of one hundred and fifty refugees who suffered from psychosomatic blindness. Their eyes were healthy – they simply could not see: “These were, for the most part, simple women who did not have access to psychological vocabulary and who did not talk about themselves easily. But from the stories they told, it was clear why they might have wanted to stop seeing. What they had witnessed would have made anyone discouraged from looking at the world again” (50).

This account describes the extreme pain – physical and psychological – of the witness, of the one who survives. In relating a tale of terror such as that found in the killing fields of Cambodia or the trenches of European warfare there is a recurring reluctance to translate the reality of war into the quotidian realm of language. One cannot simply “get on with it” after the actual experience is over. Just as the Cambodian refugees reached a point where they no longer wanted to see, where their very survival may well have depended on shutting their eyes to further atrocity, so too does the act of shutting one’s mouth serve to protect one from the pain of reliving the horror of war.

While many historical works have documented the last century’s long roll call of bloody conflict, and while there has been a recent upsurge in literary attention to the experiences of wartime generations now in their old age, the enduring stereotype of post-war nondisclosure on the part of returned servicemen continues to haunt the writings of later generations. New Zealand poet Jeffrey Paparoa Holman sums up a generation’s acceptance of the silence that surrounded the experiences of World War II as he describes his youthful search for his father’s story in the shelves of the mobile library: “It was all there: the heads, the bits of blasted / bodies, horror my father was too dumb to speak” (57).

As Fussell explains, logically there is no reason why the English language could not perfectly well render the actuality of trench warfare:

[I]t is rich in terms like *blood, terror, agony, madness, shit, cruelty, murder, sell-out, pain* and *hoax*, as well as phrases like *legs blown off, intestines gushing out over his hands, screaming all night, bleeding to death from the rectum*, and the like. . . . The problem was less one of “language” than of gentility and optimism; it was less a problem of “linguistics” than of rhetoric . . . the real reason is that soldiers have discovered that no one is very interested in the bad news they have to report. What listener wants to be torn and shaken when he doesn’t have to be? We have made *unspeakable* mean indescribable: it really means *nasty*. (169-70)

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<sup>4</sup> From here I refer to Eva Hoffman simply as Hoffman, Frederick Hoffman is given his full name.

Whether to save family members from a disturbing truth, to attempt to banish painful memories or to support a country's determined desire to protect the dream of a more peaceful and prosperous future, the apparent reluctance to share wartime experiences by returning armed forces has been widely recorded by writers and commentators throughout the western world. Yet there is too a very real impediment to the imparting of such knowledge – that is, the ability of the language of pre-war experience to convey horror on a personally unprecedented level to those who have not been privy to such experiences. When it comes to representing the unreasonable, unheroic, large-scale brutality of war, from the battlegrounds of World War I to the wars of more recent history, language does appear to have lost its power to signify reality, to connect readers with the horrors of human conflict beyond the reiteration of “conventional cant”, as Paula Fox writes:

What I am thinking about is the deadening of language, an extreme alienation from living experience which manifests itself in words that have no resonance, a language of labels that numbs our power to feel, our sensibilities, and stifles our innate capacity to question, to turn things over in our minds and reflect upon them. During the Vietnam War, the phrase *body count* entered the American vocabulary. It is an ambiguous phrase, inorganic, even faintly sporting. It distances us from the terrible reality of the dead and the mutilated. (1994)

Such a distancing and the ensuing repression of experiences have been blamed for the prevalence of what is now termed post-traumatic stress disorder as experienced by returning servicemen.<sup>5</sup>

The unwitting or inadvertent witness “to a trauma, to a crime or to an outrage; witness to a horror or an illness whose effects explode any capacity for explanation or rationalization” is, says Shoshana Felman (“Education and Crisis” 4), a familiar figure in contemporary literature, and certainly, in exploring the impact of war on the lives of soldiers and civilians, many writers of contemporary fiction have used the silence of a central character as an indicator of the degree of atrocity to which they have stood witness or been subject. In doing so they have avoided the risk of aestheticising pain or horror while still communicating the terror experienced by those who have first-hand knowledge of the human capability for brutality under the banner of “just” war. In her *Regeneration* trilogy, Pat Barker attends to the phenomenon of shellshock as experienced by many soldiers during World War I and as scrutinised by real-life psychiatrist William Halse Rivers at Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh, Scotland. During his time at Craiglockhart, Rivers explored the psychological state of soldiers returning from the front line. A cluster of symptoms including blindness, deafness, paralysis, chronic

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<sup>5</sup> Concerns about the psychological condition of Vietnam veterans saw the official recognition of post-traumatic stress disorder by American psychiatry in 1980.

fatigue, hallucinations, mutism and nightmares was being diagnosed under such names as soldiers' heart, battle fatigue, effort syndrome, neurocirculatory asthenia (or neurasthenia), combat neurosis, combat hysteria and conversion hysteria. Many of the soldiers displayed what Freud termed "conversion disorders", problems formed through the subconscious that included the inability to walk, talk, see or hear. The most common term to describe the symptoms of those returning from the Great War, however, was shellshock. Initially these indications were attributed to shockwaves from an explosion, causing microscopic haemorrhages in the brain or jolting the spinal cord, yet in many instances there appeared to be no such sign of physical interference. New psychological theories suggested that these symptoms were the subconscious reactions to extreme and supposedly "cowardly" fear in the face of death. While this was later discounted, of the 100,000 British soldiers who returned from the Western Front diagnosed with shellshock, many were sent for treatments including re-education, persuasion, suggestion, placebos.<sup>6</sup>

From October 1915 until the end of 1917 Rivers served at Craiglockhart where officers believed to be suffering from psychological trauma – including poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen – were sent for treatment. In his paper presented to the Royal School of Medicine on 4 December 1917 and subsequently published in *The Lancet* in 1918, Rivers described the symptoms of trauma displayed by the men in his care as resulting from "repression", an active or voluntary process "whereby a person endeavours to thrust out of his memory some part of his mental content" which then becomes inaccessible to manifest consciousness. There are few aspects of life, he argued, in which repression plays so prominent and so *necessary* a part as in the preparation for war, during which a soldier is trained to stifle potentially dangerous emotional reactions to his surroundings. As Rivers said in his 1917 presentation, shutting down personal emotion is a very successful technique for those forced to witness or undertake terrible acts.

Both Charles Manning and Sassoon in Barker's *The Eye in the Door* refer to this process of emotional survival, described by Hoffman as a "fragmentation of the psychic cells, of the victim's self and soul" (41). For Manning, serving at the Front is "just a bloody awful job and we get on and do it. I mean, you split enormous parts of yourself off, anyway" (159). Sassoon, who protested against the war (and whose diagnosis of shellshock Barker describes as an attempt by his friends to minimise the impact of his anti-war stance), observes, "I've always coped with the situation by blocking out the killing side, cutting it off, and then suddenly one's brought face to face with the fact that, no, actually there's only one person there and that person is a potential killer of Huns. . . . it's no good encouraging people to know themselves, to face up to their emotion, because out there they are better off not having any" (231). In his poem *Survivors*, written at Craiglockhart in 1917, Sassoon describes the assault on voice that is experienced by those who are unable to block out "the killing side":

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<sup>6</sup> It can be argued that these were the lucky ones – shellshock victims were often mocked by their peers, hundreds were imprisoned and 300 were shot.

No doubt they'll soon get well; the shock and strain  
 Have caused their stammering, disconnected talk,  
 Of course they're "longing to go out again", –  
 These boys with old, scared faces, learning to walk. (32-33)

The most trying and distressing symptoms of shellshock, Rivers argued, were not the result of the experiences of warfare. Rather they were due to the attempt to banish from the mind such distressing memories. This ongoing practice of repression, Rivers explained in his 1917 address, "does not cease when some shock or strain has removed the soldier from the scene of warfare, but it may take an active part in the maintenance of the neurosis". At this point, he argued, repression becomes the more serious act of dissociation from a previous experience – that is, suppression. This process, Rivers believed, in line with Freud's psychological theories, had to be reversed through the active recall of such traumatic moments (unlike Rivers's real life colleague Lewis Yealland who simply cured those working-class soldiers unable to speak with primitive electroshock therapy in order to send them back into service as quickly as possible).

These theories help explain the figure of Billy Prior in *Regeneration* when he arrives at Craiglockhart completely mute. Prior is a twenty-two-year-old Second-Lieutenant, once youthful and vibrant, now wracked by terrifying nightmares. While Sassoon's "problem" is that he speaks out against a nation that certainly does not want to hear his anti-war sentiments, Prior's ailment is not speaking at all, resorting instead to notes written on a notepad. According to Rivers's diagnosis, his mutism is the result of his attempt to disassociate himself from the horror of his wartime experiences – an effort which had continued into an environment where it was no longer necessary or appropriate.

For Prior himself, language simply fails at the job: "I honestly think if the war went on for a hundred years another language would evolve, one that was capable of describing the sound of a bombardment or the buzzing of flies on a hot August day on the Somme. There are no words. There are no words for what I felt when I saw the setting sun rise" (*Ghost Road* 198). The "setting sun ris[ing]" here becomes a metonym for the unmentioned, irrational atrocities that he witnessed and that continue to lie beyond articulation, atrocities that challenge "the comforting notion that suffering has meaning in that it strengthens, ennobles or redeems the human soul" (Langer, *Art from the Ashes* 5). Prior here echoes the words of Holocaust survivor Jean Améry in his essay "Torture":

It would be totally senseless to try and describe here the pain that was inflicted upon me. Was it "like a red hot iron in my shoulders", and was another "like a dull wooden stake that has been driven into the back of my head"? One comparison would only stand for the other, and in the end we would be hoaxed in turn by the hopeless merry-go-round of figurative speech. The pain was

what it was. Beyond that there is nothing to say. Qualities of feeling are as incomparable as they are indescribable. They mark the limit of the capacity of language to communicate. (130)

Prior can be explained in light of the poets also portrayed here by Barker. While the literary work of Sassoon, Robert Graves and Owen moved from “prewar freedom to wartime bondage, frustration, and absurdity” (Fussell 312), Prior can be seen as incapable of marking this transition, of being held in the moment of his trauma in mute fixity to a recent, harrowing wartime experience. As Laub says, “Massive trauma precludes its registration; the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out. . . . While historical evidence to the event which constitutes the trauma may be abundant and documents in vast supply, the trauma – as a known event and not simply as an overwhelming shock – has not been truly witnessed yet, not been taken cognizance of” (“Bearing Witness” 57).

Crapanzano notes that many, though by no means all, war neuroses or post-traumatic stress disorders relate to the injury or death of another, a buddy, a friend, or even a stranger, an enemy, with whom one was in life-and-death contact:

Often there is a sense of guilt: “It should have been me,” which we might also want to read as “It could have been me” . . . . A Vietnam veteran, who had been hospitalized with a serious infection when a younger man in his team was killed, tortures himself: “In my heart it’s – if I were there, he wouldn’t be dead. I didn’t do my job. I didn’t bring him home”. . . . Obviously the effect of the trauma is increased by the meaningless of the war, of the occasion at least, by the sense that something fundamentally human has gone wrong. . . . What I want to stress is not, however, the relationship between trauma and meaninglessness but the confrontation with one’s own death, as it always has to be, through its objectification in another. Despite all our confrontations with death – and I can speak from personal experience here – they are always of our possible death. (94)

Such confrontations, Crapanzano argues, stand apart from history and from normal chains of association. Resisting integration into a personal narrative, they remain intransigent givens, proclaiming events “that [do] not have – and cannot have – the factual status [they] claim. The functionality of the replay masks the absence, the mutilation at least of the facticity of the ‘originating’ event” (91). For Prior, as with many of the mute characters discussed in this study, there is an identifiable event which, Barker suggests, tipped the young officer into this episode of psychotic suppression. This is the act of recovering the eyeball of a soldier killed while under his command in a dugout amidst a nightmarish setting of crumbling parapets, flooded saps and “splinters of blackened bone” (102). In Tim Binding’s *Anthem*, about the impact of the 1982 Falklands War on military bandsman Henry Armstrong, this tormenting event is the sudden explosion that leaves Armstrong’s commander



missing half a head and the marine with whom he had just been talking reduced to a hand and “a perfect set of genitals, soft and untouched” (337). The physical and psychological damage experienced by Vietnam War veteran Howard Kapostach in Dave King’s *The Ha-Ha* (2005) is the result of a mine explosion in Vietnam just sixteen days after Kapostach began his frontline duty. The explosion leaves a fellow serviceman to whom he was, just seconds before, involved in casual conversation lying on the ground surrounded by “bits of life” (28), while Kapostach himself is lifted into the air by the force of the landmine in a surreal moment of elevation (he later relives this experience each time he mows the grass on the ha-ha – a garden feature in which a stone boundary is disguised by a bank of sloping lawn – in “one or two moments of breathless grace” [143]). In all these instances the physical revulsion towards such “bits of life” is augmented by the personal association with the victim.

Martin Booth’s *Islands of Silence* describes the twenty-year silence of World War I veteran Alec Marquand (also a former patient of Craiglockhart) as a response to both the horror of his wartime experiences and the strangely mythical story of a disturbing experiment in language. For Marquand it is not just an awareness of his calm acceptance of so many of his comrades running to their death during the Gallipoli campaign – “We just watched, almost dispassionately, as they came towards us . . . I found myself choosing one and following his fortunes. It was like being a child watching raindrops river down a windowpane, betting against myself which one would reach the sill first” (219) – that finally tips him into a life of elective mutism, but the repellant act of tasting human flesh:

The bullet struck Cody in the temple. The side of his head exploded.

My eyes were bathed in a tepid fluid, my sight blurred as if I was looking through a veil of muslin. Into my mouth, still open from my last words, came pieces of spongy substance, the consistency of soft cod’s roe. I bit into it. It was warm and tasted metallic. I choked and tried to spit it out, but it clung to the lining of my cheeks, to my teeth and tongue.

Eventually, I swallowed. (223)

For Jakob Beer in Anne Michaels’s *Fugitive Pieces* it is the unforgettable sound of “the spray of buttons, little white teeth” (7), as heard from the cupboard in which the boy is hidden “like a concealed manuscript behind the wallpaper of the cupboard witness[ing] an event that is unrepresentable” (Cook 14), that signifies the murder of his parents and sister by Nazi soldiers and renders his tongue useless:

The burst door. Wood ripped from hinges, cracking like ice under the shouts. Noises never heard before, torn from my father’s mouth. Then silence. My mother had been sewing a button on my shirt. She kept her buttons in a chipped saucer. I heard the rim of the saucer in circles on the floor. I

heard the spray of buttons, little white teeth. . . . I wanted to go to my parents, to touch them. But I couldn't, unless I stepped on their blood. (7)

In witnessing such “a radical human condition of exposure and vulnerability”, says Felman, the testifying witness fails to offer a “completed statement, a totalizable account of these events” (“Education and Crisis” 5). Such incidents are thus absorbed into a range of experiences that exist outside the expected parameters of familiar, coherent and acceptable social behaviour. Certainly, Rivers’s repeated attempts to help Prior remember the event that left him incapable of speech – the event which Prior vehemently claims he cannot recall – are only resolved when Rivers agrees to submit his patient to hypnosis.

In other texts, however, no such explanation – or, as the mystified daughter in Carol Shields’s *Unless* would state, no such *thing* – is provided as the demonstrative episode that epitomises the fall from humane experience into unspeakable terror. In William Wharton’s *Birdy* (1979), returned soldier Al gives voice to the reader’s curiosity regarding the event or events that triggered his friend Birdy’s complete withdrawal into a psychotic silence, an extension of his previous identification with his caged birds into a state of being incapable of any form of communication or self-care after his return from the war: “Maybe Birdy’s just scared,” he thinks, “and doesn’t want to listen. What the hell could have happened to him?” (11). This question, articulated by a man himself swathed in bandages, is left unanswered – as readers we can only surmise that whatever did happen lies beyond the coherence necessary for utterance.<sup>7</sup>

### **“Corporal Smith’s ulna”: the physicality of trauma**

As a response to sudden and seemingly irrational horror, silence stands in lieu of explanation, effectively keeping the actual fact of violence away from the concern of the reader or writer as the event in question awaits translation into a state of comprehensibility that pre-empts articulation. Such a technique is instrumental in negotiating a path from the disembodied act of reading itself to the sheer physicality of the body in pain – a path normally hampered by the inability of the reading mind to forgo the experience of the semiotic in a bid to re-experience the corporeal. Tanner explains:

As the victim’s body disappears beneath the force of narrative abstraction or is rendered purely material through a focus on its mechanistic functions, narrative may implicitly endorse a vision of violence that divorces an act of violation from its human consequences. . . . Because the materiality of the body and its susceptibility to pain constitute one of the principal dynamics of violence, an analysis of the representation of violence demands not only a recognition of the reader who serves

as the semiotic subject, but an exploration of the way in which the reader experiences him- or herself as a body. . . . The reader's admittance into the scene of violence is thus achieved only at the expense of disembodiment; the victim's experience, on the other hand, is defined by the overwhelming presence of a vulnerable body. The distance and detachment of a reader who must leave his or her body behind in order to enter imaginatively into the scene of violence make it possible for representations of violence to obscure the material dynamics of bodily violation, erasing not only the victim's body but his or her pain. (8-9)

By restricting the speaking voice, by limiting rationalising explanation and intellectual examination, these authors hold the reader's focus to the damaged body as it appears to the other characters in the text or as it impacts on the imagination of the witness, so supplementing the fractured, muted accounts of war with a physical and uncontested indicator of the truth. In limiting the detailed articulation of dehumanising violence, these authors force the reader to seek information from the injured body, just as the magistrate is forced to confront the tortured feet of the young girl in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Hauptmann Bohlke has to confront Hanna X's injuries in Brink's *The Other Side of Silence*, and Barton in Coetzee's *Foe* has to imagine the remains of Friday's mutilated tongue to realise how completely his story has been silenced.

Just as Prior's mutism is explained through the scientific interpretations of Rivers, in *Islands of Silence* the voice of Dr Belasco provides the official, acceptable commentary on the twenty-year silence of Marquand. In this instance, however, Belasco's medical diagnosis falls short of a full understanding of Marquand's experiences as relayed to the reader:

"The victim [says the doctor] has no escape from his predicament except into his own mind. He is aware of his surroundings but he gradually becomes unable to relate to them. They are simply too alien and terrifying. He accepts them but he tries to negate them. In vain. How can one ignore the bone that sticks out of the dug-out wall, knowing it to be Sergeant Jones's femur or Corporal Smith's ulna? To fight those awful truths, the victim withdraws from reality into fantasy." (48)

With such an inadequate explanation (Marquand has clearly not retreated into fantasy) Booth draws attention to the chasm that lies between the official diagnosis, delivered in a language that is coherent, orderly and rational, and those chaotic experiences that remain trapped within Marquand's damaged body, that have never been adequately rationalised beyond the immediacy of the horror of chancing upon "Corporal Smith's ulna."

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<sup>7</sup> It is this prohibition of access either to knowledge (as in *Foe* or *Birdy*) or to the actual site of trauma (as in *Disgrace* and *Fugitive Pieces*) that, Coetzee argues, is a reason why the novelist should be fascinated with it: "The dark, forbidden chamber is the origin of novelistic fantasy per se" ("Dark Chamber" 364).

The body, as we have already seen, is the primary, inarguable record of war and terror; it is a site of inscription, a “mouth-house” (Crapanzano 72). It resists prevarication, reticence and lies. Its visible wounds account indisputably for the crimes inflicted on that person and its legitimacy acts as a rampart against the ability of language to distort, alter or obfuscate fundamental truths. The body thus assumes a mediating role, resurrecting the connection between signifier and signified, word and thing. As the conscientious objector, Mac, says in Barker’s *The Eye in the Door*, ““In the end moral and physical truths have to be proved on the body, because this mass of nerve and muscle and blood is what we are” (112). And when in pain, this “mass of nerve and muscle” presents overwhelming evidence of trauma that the voice cannot or will not convey: “Pain is said to defy words. It is there turned on itself, opaque, monolithic, intransigent, in and out of time” (Crapanzano 90). Indeed, Scarry argues, the description of an “intensely painful form of bodily contortion” with words usually reserved for instances of civilisation produces its own “circle of negation” (4). The physical body, both these writers argue, is able to articulate pain in a manner that, by its very dependency on rational and ordered thinking, language cannot.

In retreating from the world of speech, the characters featured in the novels in this investigation retreat from the world of socialised humanity, placing themselves in a realm marked by violence and horror – a realm similar to that occupied by the inhumanity of the aggressor. In the texts studied here this process of dehumanisation is frequently marked by an association with the physical zone of the dead or the bestial. In Michaels’s *Fugitive Pieces* this zone is aligned with the darkness of underground, a prosaic underworld from which human forms reappear in a less human, monster-like state. Following the murder of his parents, young Beer emerges from his grave-like hiding place in a nearby swamp in an altered, terrified and terrifying condition. Like the murdered fourth-century BC “Tollund Man”, excavated from a peat bog in Denmark in 1950 and reappearing as one of Seamus Heaney’s “Stockinged corpses” from the “cauldron bog” (37) in his poem of the same name, Beer “surfaces” like a fearful fragment of a violent past:

Bog-boy, I surfaced into the miry streets of the drowned city . . . I squirmed from the marshy ground like Tollund Man, Graubelle Man, like the boy they uprooted in the middle of Franz Josef Street while they were repairing the road, six hundred cockleshell beads around his neck, a helmet of mud. Dripping with the prune-coloured juices of the peat-sweating bog. Afterbirth of earth.  
(Michaels 5)

This bog – the site of a two-thousand-year-old community long submerged in a Polish river – acts as an “ur-site of rebirth for Jakob” (311) from which he emerges as “a different version of himself” (Kandiyoti 311). It is a site thick with history, meanings and objects; “a counter-*topos* that speaks to both literary history and the politics of place” (311) in Barker’s blood- and mud-strewn dugouts as well as in the Holocaust. As Dalia Kandiyoti notes,

Beer's days in the bog "echo the experience of concentration-camp prisoners" (311), the earliest of whom, as political prisoners held in the Nazi camp of Bogermor, composed the anti-National Socialist song "Moorsoldaten" ("Peat Bog Soldiers"). While Kandiyoti is correct in regarding Jakob's re-emergence from the bog as a rebirth, a form of "hidden child, refugee, and survivor" (311), the boy, like Kosinski's unnamed protagonist in *The Painted Bird* who loses his voice after being thrown in the sewage pit of a rural village (to be discussed in more detail in the following chapter), nevertheless reappears corrupted, scarred by his experience, his muteness testimony to an atrocity enacted upon his own family from which he never fully recovers. (It is apt that Beer's first book of published poetry is entitled "Groundwork".)

In his discussion of the poetry of Paul Celan, John Felstiner alludes to this notion of a "buried people" (95), those who died without trace, whose unheard voices speak into the silence of the living. It is the earth, Felstiner argues, that carries the blood and the tears of wartime suffering – a literal description of burial in the ground and, in terms of the descriptions of World War I, the inhuman state of taking cover for days, weeks or months in water-logged trenches (Fussell quotes poet and author Edmund Blunden's description of returning from a routine patrol at the Front after which, "We were received as Lazarus was" [115]). Indeed, these death-filled trenches of Europe can be seen as the origins of recent fiction's usage of the trope of the underworld, not as the destination described in Homer's *Odyssey* or Virgil's *The Aeneid*, into which the hero descends to lay claim to a vital piece of divine knowledge before returning to earth, but rather as a human hell, palpable, real and completely lacking in edification. This difference is noted in *Fugitive Pieces*, as Michaels aligns the discovery of the rock drawings of the Lascaux caves in 1942 – "the swimming deer, floating horses, rhinos, ibex, and reindeer" (143) – with the fact that Jews were, that same year, being "crammed into the earth then covered with a dusting of soil" (143). In *Regeneration* Prior recalls the site of his war as a putrid wasteland marked by waist-deep water, mud, darkness, sandbags, chicken wire, dugouts with "gagged mouths" and a "green, ratty, decomposing smell" (102).

For those who emerge from this earth, as with Prior and young Beer in *Fugitive Pieces*, it is as if they have partaken not only of the silence but also of the suffering and the very physical death that permeates the ground, just as the contact with dead human flesh experienced by Armstrong in *Anthem*, Kapostach in *The Ha-Ha* and Marquand in *Islands of Silence* tips these characters into an unmentionable realm of subhumanity. In *Fugitive Pieces*, where the silence of the memory of war is locked into the stillness of the earth, truth nevertheless finds a voice: "In the holy ground of the mass graves, the earth blistered and spoke" (143). Yet such words are far from the beauty of literature or the sanctity of the holy utterances – when the blistered earth speaks the sound is that of the dying, the moans and cries of the physical body under horrifying assault.

In Binding's *Anthem*, Henry Armstrong, the bandsman who finds himself amongst British forces on their way to reclaim the Falkland Islands, becomes a ghost-like validation of the bloodiness of war fought on an island far from his homeland. As Armstrong prepares to leave the Falklands, after witnessing and participating in a

night of carnage, he realises the loss of full humanity that has befallen him during the previous twenty-four hours: “[A]lthough he had survived he had been right. He would never leave this island. All that he had been would be left here, along with the rest of the dead. What was left was a sculpted shell, a man bereft of senses, a man who would speak to no one, not even himself, for in truth, he had nothing to say” (338). Back in London, physically and emotionally damaged, he relies on the proceeds of busking in the Underground for his livelihood. Within this subterranean zone he is recognised only by his absence of speech: “He moved in and out of the city like a wreath of smoke, keeping himself to himself”, leaving nothing but a “lingering presence, a darkening, a flare of vanished heat” (3). We are reminded here of the ghost-like insubstantiality of the mute Mundy in Jack Dann’s *The Silent* or the unbreachable Otherness of Friday in *Foe*. Armstrong’s speechlessness is thus a deliberate move to disentangle himself from what it means to be human – he was simply “keeping the promise he had made, never to utter again the sounds that marked him as human, and he had stuck to his pledge without much difficulty these five years” (4). In the half-life of his post-war existence, as he later contemplates his return to speech, Armstrong describes his fledgling utterances as a re-entry into the world of humanity: “And what to say after these five years, what could be the first sentence; how could he introduce himself again into the living world?” (405).

Marquand in *Islands of Silence* refuses such a re-introduction. In order to deflect what he considers to be the worst of reality on to this “living world”, he takes pride in the fact that he has been able to absorb such knowledge, martyr-like, into his body:

In my silence I possess the rarest of assets of which others would be immensely jealous were they to know of its secret: for my silence places me out of the reach of common harm. There is nothing the world can do to me now for I am cosseted in my security, safe within the room in which I have existed for longer than most men live and sound in the knowledge of the shelter of silence. Because I do not speak, I am beyond argument, beyond reproach, free of blame and released from the dictates of convention or society. The worst reality can throw at me, it already has: and I have, in retrospect, caught it or deflected it with the consummate skill of a professional cricketer (95).

Despite this ironic pride in a job well done, Marquand uses the phrase “I have existed” as opposed to “I have lived”, suggesting yet again a form of sub-life, a grim thereness more akin to a patient whose mind is lost than to the articulate, intelligent man we know him to be. Cosseted in a wheelchair in the hospital gardens, Marquand aligns his life to that of an unthreatening animal, a hedgehog “mute and small, always ready to curl into a defensive ball when someone prods it with a stick” (86). Likewise in *Birdy*, as the central character retreats to the seemingly saner, or at least safer, world of a caged bird, we see a man shutting down the avenues of sensory or intellectual perception that define a rational being, effectively closing himself down as a man. Such animal-

like behaviour subscribes to Scarry's description of torture with its extreme annihilation of the self, an annihilation that is "unfelt, unsensed by anyone else" (36).

### **"Sky-blue beads for silence": fragmented terror**

In each of the texts addressed in this chapter the pain of the traumatised body and the details of the specific events that prompted the prolonged moment of mute shock emerge, if they emerge at all, slowly, almost reluctantly, from either the character's own stuttered thoughts, or the explanatory voice of the other characters. Such memories are relayed with a subjective cinematic veracity in short, often incoherent fragments at odds with traditional literary systems of disclosure with their associated assumptions of orderliness (yet in keeping with real symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder [McNally 135]). In *Regeneration* Rivers treats his patients in order that they may return to the front line, yet he himself stutters, lapses into silence and leaves sentences unfinished in a pattern of fractured speech that echoes the many communication disorders experienced by the men in his care. Although we are told that Rivers himself stammered as a child, Barker's frequent allusions to River's repeated silences and incomplete speech show him struggling to replicate the potentially dangerous fluidity of wartime rhetoric. He alleges that "the stammerings, the nightmares, the tremors, the memory lapses, of officers were just as much unwitting protest as the grosser maladies of the men" (*Regeneration* 238), and his own speech difficulties can be seen as his own if not protest at least uncertainty regarding his treatment of patients that they may return to "activities that were not self-destructive but positively suicidal" (*Regeneration* 238).<sup>8</sup>

In Binding's *Anthem*, Armstrong's night of fighting in the Falkland Islands in the company of the desperate and dangerous Stanley is described in a confusion of images and impressions:

[A] flickering life, as if caught in an old movie with the frame slipping, figures jumping out in sudden leaps, jerking out of nowhere, hugely black, hugely white, faces split by greasepaint grins of comedy and tragedy, their shouting mouths silenced by the unseen orchestra, the clash of cymbals, the boom of drums, the conductor riotous, . . . The killings seemed so bizarre, so varied, so musically choreographed, the deaths too a multiplicity of balletic turns. (333)

The description is surreal, ghoulish and outlandish as the killings escalate and bodies become "soup or slabs of meat" (333). The vivid evocation of the horror that pushes Armstrong further and further away from his previous assumptions of rational conduct, human empathy and speech is re-enacted by the jarring absurdity of the images

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<sup>8</sup> As Virginie Renard says in relation to Barker's use of testimony and memory, a stammer is "the symptom *par excellence* of a traumatic memory: it contains the repetition, the excess and the incomprehensible chaos inherent to trauma, and it manifests both the desire and the incapability to speak" (154).

described. The result is a series of visual memories torn from its moorings of rationality and sequence, a succession of scenes that proves in its very chaoticness an experience that, for Armstrong at least, has transcended the orderly process of memory. W. G. Sebald explains that an unendurable memory – “partly vague, partly full of a still-acute fear of death” – is a problem which to a large degree determines the mental state of victims of (and here I will add witnesses to) atrocity:

[I]t is as if a diffuse ability to forget goes hand in hand with the recurrent resurgence of images which cannot be banished from the memory, and which remains effective as agencies of almost pathological hypermnesia in a past otherwise emptied of content. . . . The gathering and mental organization of experiences is usually determined by the emotional states associated with them, and does not shatter the diachronic framework. For the victims of persecution, however, the thread of chronological time is broken, background and foreground merge, the victim’s logical means of support in his existence are suspended . . . . The only fixed points are traumatic scenes recurring with a painful clarity of memory and vision. (153-54)

Certainly, Armstrong’s recollections of the carnage on the Falklands are described with a vividness that is in stark contrast to the murky dimness of London’s Underground where he subsequently spends his days.

Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) explores the redundancy of language and meaning in relation to the bombing of Dresden in World War II and the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York in 2001. In this book the decline of Dresden survivor Thomas Schell into complete silence is set within an urbane, twenty-first-century western literary landscape in which the ability of language to explain, illuminate or even signify falls before the power of the visual image and extreme violence. Foer places the responsibility for transmitting the experience of the 1945 bombing of Dresden (in which 60,000 people were killed and a city nearly obliterated), Hiroshima (in which an estimated 140,000 people were killed and many more suffered the after-effects of exposure to radiation) and New York (in which about 3,000 people were killed) on the emotionally damaged Schell, whose pregnant lover Anna was killed during the Dresden attack, and his grandson Oskar, an unusual nine-year-old boy who lost his father in the attack on the World Trade Center. Just as Prior’s experiences are filtered through his own circumstances as the son of an overly ambitious mother and an abusive father, coupled with a keenly felt low socio-economic status and an anxious sexuality, so Foer’s less-than-capable protagonists – a young boy with a seemingly autistic temperament and a disillusioned, homeless old man – serve as an analogy for the limited powers of society as a whole to comprehend in any meaningful way the human capacity for such acts of war. Like Hulme in *the bone people*, Barker and Foer place characters that are already marked by vulnerability and weakness in the position of trying to cope with, make sense of, or be a mouthpiece for, terror. In Foer’s novel, the information that is conveyed is done so fitfully,



spasmodically, almost subversively as the truth is held largely within unread letters, unreadable memoirs and unanswered telephone messages, and face-to-face communication is bypassed in favour of similarly stilted, often unsuccessful systems of interaction.

On the day of the attacks on the World Trade Center Oskar's father, trapped in one of the towers, leaves a series of unanswered messages on his home phone. Rather than responding directly to his father's last message – he does not pick up the phone even though he has since returned home – Oskar later translates his father's last desperate message on the answer phone into a code of coloured beads and string: "[S]ky-blue beads for silence, maroon beads for breaks between words, and long and short pieces of string between the beads for long and short beeps, which are actually called blips, I think, or something" (35). His father's distressing words are thus stripped of their power as indicators of fear and distress; they are defused, turned into self-referential colour symbols that appear, at least to a child, to reinstate a coherence, no matter how arbitrary, completely lacking in the events that killed his father (while Oskar refers to this bracelet as Morse code, he translates only the silences between words and the telephone beeps – the words themselves are left untranscribed). Langer suggests that:

Perhaps speechlessness, with a dry silence of the brain and a paralysis of the emotions, rather than empathy, is what the literature of atrocity substitutes for Aristotle's idea of purgation. Not the grave relief of having shared the tragic destiny of a heroic if fallible human creature, but a kind of stupefied uncertainty as to whether or not the events we have encountered have actually occurred. (*Literary Imagination* 164)

Certainly, Foer's description of the attack on the World Trade Center, viewed by Oskar as a series of televised images, exemplifies this dumb incomprehensibility in response to extreme violence:

Planes going into buildings.  
 Bodies falling.  
 People waving shirts out of high windows.  
 Planes going into buildings.  
 Bodies falling.  
 Planes going into buildings.  
 People covered in gray dust.  
 Bodies falling.  
 Buildings falling.  
 Planes going into buildings.  
 Planes going into buildings. (230)

The staccato reiteration, the lack of metaphor, the sheer brevity of the description all conspire to add to the cinematic quality of the imagery – akin to the repeated film footage of the attacks broadcast around the world – while never succeeding in breaching the paralysing disbelief of the viewer with plausible explanation. Each line points to a scene clearly fraught with mayhem, sound, heat and dust, yet Oskar’s experience of the attack through the lens of a TV camera carries all the distant objectivity of the disengaged filmgoer. Here again we are reminded of Prior’s odd chirpiness after recovering the eyeball – described by Prior with unthinking pertinence as a “gobstopper” (103) – of a recently killed soldier. Although his hand is shaking as he makes his discovery, he soon after finds himself watching the other men in the dugout with an irrational “sense of joy . . . elation almost. How complex those movements were, how amazing the glimpses of teeth and tongue” (103). In this instance, after being taken to the casualty clearing station, Prior is already permeated with a form of numb dislocation: “Two of his men were dead, he remembered that. Nothing else. Like the speechlessness, it seemed natural. He sat on the bench, his clasped hands dangling between his legs, and thought of nothing” (104). Such a truncated, strangely non-connecting vision is symptomatic of the neo-avant-garde in art with its suggestion that historical trauma cannot be represented or simulated; it can only be repeated – “indeed it must be repeated” (Foster 132). Foer’s unemotive reiterations – the counting of beads, the blips on a telephone message – mimic the televised footage of the two planes crashing into the Twin Towers repeatedly screened and seen by Oskar in a visual mnemonic viewed by millions yet still lacking in any real meaning beyond that of the spectacle itself.

As a society, Foster says, we have become “wired” to the spectacular event, be it the ethnic bloodbath in Bosnia, the students in Tiananmen Square, the small bodies falling out of the windows of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. “This wiring connects and disconnects us simultaneously, renders us both psychotechnologically immediate to events and geopolitically remote from them [resulting in] a new level of oxymoronic pain-and-pleasure. . . . If a postmodern subject can be posited at all, it is made and unmade in such splittings. Is it any wonder that this subject is often dysfunctional, suspended between obscene proximity and spectacular separation” (221-22). Foster goes on to differentiate the response to World War I as seen in the art and action of the dadaist movement from the “neo-dada gestures” we see today; while the first was aimed at attacking audience and market alike, the latter are adapted to modern-day viewers not only prepared for such shock “but hungry for its titillation” (11).

In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Foer enlists the limited skills of a “dysfunctional” old man and his naive grandson to reveal the overwhelming and equally unassimilable nature of mass destruction in Dresden, Hiroshima (Oskar recites to his class a harrowing story concerning the nuclear attack on this city) and New York. To portray the ineffectiveness of their attempts to make sense of such acts of terror, Foer deliberately undermines the power of communication – of speech and of the written word – to convey collective and personal trauma. In the same way that Frame and, to a lesser extent, Brink drain words of meaning by rendering them as

mere objects, throughout *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* words contained in books, magazines, letters and sheets of paper serve not as sources of information but as doorstops and paperweights – an apt if unsubtle commentary on the dearth of meaning that can be applied to such events and the subsequent failure to respond adequately, either emotionally or verbally. As written and spoken language becomes more and more inexact, as Schell loses his ability to speak and Oskar loses his ability to react emotionally to the pain of his father's death, words become impersonal, objectified – *things* as opposed to tools for human interaction or pointers to another truth. The letters written by Schell to his son, Oskar's father, are never sent – eventually they are used to fill the coffin in lieu of the unrecoverable body. Even Thomas's own day books become inexpressive physical matter, filling the bath and the grandfather clock, tainting the water, the time, the days, but never illuminating the truth that remains unuttered – that Schell does not love Oskar's grandmother, that he loves only Anna, who is dead.

While Oskar's grandmother recalls her father's reverence for the written word – “when he was done with a book he tried to give it away to someone who would love it, and if he couldn't find a worthy recipient, he buried it” (114) – her own attempt to laboriously type out her personal story, “as good as it could be, everything full of meaning” (120), is yet another failure of communication: the ancient typewriter is missing a ribbon. Schell looks to this manuscript for mention of his love for Anna (the sister of Oskar's grandmother) but his search results only in a paper cut” “I bled a little flower onto the paper on which I should have seen her kissing somebody, but this was all I saw” (120) – and the following three pages are blank.

The innocence of Oskar, compounded by his obsessive, lateral-thinking intelligence, accentuates a surface reading of language that defies further interpretation, that is reflexive, signifying only itself, concrete and finite. While Prior, with Rivers's encouragement, struggles to reinstate the importance of speech and the ability of words to carry information, truth in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is accepted as inexpressible. The pain of losing a loved one, of not loving enough, of homes obliterated, of a son never met and now a son dead – all are conducted outside the shallow yet spectacular cacophonies of war and disaster. While the written word is clearly not deemed completely valueless – either by Foer the writer or his characters with their insistent attempts at some form of communication – Oskar, his grandfather and, through death (and a disembodied voice on a telephone answering machine), his father, all are shown to retreat from the suspected complicity and inadequacy of language in the face of extreme acts of mass violence.

This perception of words as hollow, incapable of referring to the enormity of the truth for which they have been enlisted, reiterates a twentieth-century loss of faith in the ability of language to refer to a reality other than itself. This ongoing discreditation, or “radical displacement of authorial power” (Worthington 272-73), is portrayed through the repeated attention to words that fail to communicate. In writing on the Holocaust, Hoffman suggests that the danger is not so much that the Shoah will vanish into forgetfulness, but that it will expand “into an increasingly empty referent, a *symbol* of historical horror, an allegory of the Real” (177). The plethora of non-communicative words in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, battering ineffectively against a

monolithic yet unnameable Real, reminds us of the degree of trauma implicit in events that, like World War I and the bombing of Hiroshima, are absorbed into history without full understanding or recognition of the horror that these atrocities exacted on their victims.

Certainly, some would argue that a reluctance or refusal to speak about one's experience could be seen as proof of ongoing trauma. Marguerite Duras, the scriptwriter of the film *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, writes, "Impossible to talk about Hiroshima. All one can do is talk about the impossibility of talking about Hiroshima" (qtd. in Maclear 240). As with Foer's narrative, Duras's film connotes a "crisis of representation, or more specifically, a crisis of not having adequate frames to contain historical events" (244). In focusing on the extent of such inadequacy, as opposed to the documentation of the nuclear attack itself, the film, as with Foer's book, "perplexes our efforts to establish closure so as to assuage that anxiety of that which eludes closure" (Maclear 244).

Unlike Rivers's determined examination of Prior's past experiences – with its weary yet resolute modernist faith in the promise of personal if not societal resolution – in the face of the loss experienced by Oskar's grandfather neither explanation nor elaboration are necessary or desired. Meaning drifts away from language, the precision of language gives way to guesswork, curtailment, a surrender to that which seems beyond elucidation. As Thomas slowly loses the use of his voice he relies on the increasingly dubious ability of the written word to interpret his thoughts. When he wishes to laugh he writes "Ha ha ha!"; to sing in the shower he writes out the lyrics of his favourite songs: "The ink would turn the water blue or red or green, and the music would run down my legs" (18). The often humorous, usually bathetic outcomes of such attempts to translate voice into written language act as recurring reminders of the inadequacy of this, the sole tool of the writer's trade. As Thomas runs out of pages on which to write his messages he approximates his attempts at communication by reusing old messages: "'How are you feeling?' It might be that my best response was to point at 'The regular, please,' or perhaps, 'And I wouldn't say no to something sweet.'" (28). Foer includes in his book a photograph of the tattooed hands of Oskar's grandfather with the words "Yes" and "No" tattooed on the palms. As Thomas gradually loses his ability to speak, these written words become the sole medium of exchange, representing an absence of expression that itself suggests not only the trauma of a city (Dresden) destroyed and loved ones (Anna and his son) killed, but also the lack of value in any further attempts at communication beyond these two monosyllabic terms.

Throughout the book language becomes increasingly banal; for Oskar's grandmother the idiom of her newly adopted country is a mysterious and ultimately meaningless code for US citizenry as she tries to learn these strange English phrases – "chew the fat", "blow off some steam", "rings a bell" – that convey nationhood in their utterance but bear no relevance to the speaker – an ageing, blind and heartbroken German woman. Oskar, in trying to solve the riddle of a key bearing the name tag "Black" left behind by his father, tracks down a number of people with that surname from the New York phone book who, he hopes, may be able to explain the

secretive life and incomprehensible death of his father. In his search he reaches out to a group of people connected only by the shallow commonality of a shared surname and their largely isolated lives. Indicative of the pervading sense of social and personal bereftness resonating through the post-9/11 New York landscape, each of these figures is alone in their mourning, making sense of their unique losses through seemingly random, usually physical, acts – hammering nails into a shared matrimonial bed, squatting on the roof of the Empire State Building in memory of shared experience with a loved one, hiding out in a central city apartment. They say little, they do not venture far; they do not try to find convincing reason for the circumstances that hold them in their circumscribed lives.

One of these Mr Blacks is a centenarian war correspondent. His sole preoccupation now is the maintenance of a filing cabinet of names with one-word descriptions for each person, a condensation of various lifetimes of achievement boiled down to a single word – “Che Guevara: war! Tom Cruise: money!” (157) – always followed by an exclamation mark. Again we are reminded of the denigration of language from a precise illumination of a rational world to an oblique pointer to the general banality of horror or wealth or career success. It is a stunted role, failing to evoke the communality of discourse or any effective investigation of reason, history or aspiration. There are, however, some glimmerings of hope within this dearth of meaningful communication. Oskar and his grandmother are able to speak adequately, meaningfully, albeit spasmodically, via two-way radio between two tall, faceless apartment buildings, and near the end of the book Oskar’s endless letters to Stephen Hawking, invariably answered by an automated stock response, are finally rewarded by a personal response from the celebrated physicist.

As already seen in the failed attempts at communication in Brink’s *The Other Side of Silence*, Deane’s *Reading in the Dark* and Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Foer repeatedly draws our attention to the failure of – and impediments to – communication. Thomas’s constant apologies to Oskar’s grandmother clearly do not relate to his ongoing love for her now dead sister, Anna. Rather he apologises for his failure to communicate, for his habitual reliance on magazines, letters, memoirs, notes and wall scribbles that repeatedly fail to convey any sincere explanation for his lack of commitment to his family. Asked by Oscar to try to talk, “He opened his mouth and put his fingers on his throat. They fluttered, like Black’s fingers looking for a one-word biography, but no sound came out, not even an ugly sound, or breath” (257). Thomas’s silence is complete, and Foer substantiates this speechlessness throughout the book: he uses photographs in lieu of text, he uses blank pages to illustrate silence, in one of Thomas’s many letters to his now-dead son the font decreases in size and the words become scrambled together until whole pages are filled up with an unreadable blackness. The implacable pain of losing first his beloved Anna and then his son, are completely, irretrievably, beyond articulation. The “Yes” and “No” tattooed on his palms are all that remain, all that, for him, are worth communicating as exactitude of meaning gives way to the inexactitude of physical and emotional pain. For a child or an old man there appears to be no other means to encapsulate such truths, and certainly as a writer Foer is all too aware of the limited tools

available to depict historic trauma on such a scale. “Stand too close to horror,” Hoffman says, “and you get fixation, paralysis and engulfment. Stand too far, and you get voyeurism or forgetting. Distance matters” (177). Certainly, the title of Foer’s book suggests this very danger – the sudden becalming of linguistic exploration – in standing “too close” to horror.

Vogler describes the sense of discomfort that such a physically evocative yet referentially blocked use of language exerts on the relationship between the reader and the event being described:

Shifting from communicating information to producing effect does not allow for adequacy of expression in the visual sense. Any affect produced in the reader, however great, will always be inadequate compared to that of the original witness, whose affect will in turn be inadequate compared to the full horror of the event. (183)

As with Coetzee, Booth and Frame, Foer uses language to enact this very inadequacy of language to reiterate the initial affect of trauma, shoulder-tapping the reader to indicate when he or she must step in and read what remains unsaid or what lies beneath the noise of reassuring but limited explanation. If, as Hutcheon argues, postmodernism is “embedded in dominant, liberal, humanist culture” even while it critiques, parodies and ostensibly undermines that culture (*Poetics* 6), then that very capacity to critique is held not only by the western reading community but also by the very language it uses in its ongoing act of self-narration. In *Regeneration* Prior’s brief episode of silence is situated within River’s medical theorising and note-taking and even the poets’ literary explorations of their wartime experiences. Here we are reminded of Shield’s *Unless*, in which Reta and her friends talk around Norah’s speechlessness, not arriving at any conclusion but highlighting the inadequacy of language – especially the calm, rational language of liberal, well-educated western suburbia – to convey the extremity of the young woman’s experience. Like Kerewin’s incessant speech in *the bone people*, Barton in Coetzee’s *Foe* conducts a long monologue around Friday’s unspoken story, only to convince herself and her listener that no one other than Friday can tell his story. In *Disgrace* Lurie ponders and probes around his daughter’s refusal to talk about her rape, which is portrayed to the reader only through the silence from the other side of the lavatory door behind which Lurie is locked. In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* silence is encoded in sounds incapable of illuminating pain, be it the blip of an unanswered telephone message from Oskar’s father or the pause before the explosion in Hiroshima. When Prior turns away from Rivers’s questioning, leaving “NO MORE WORDS” written on his notepad (*Regeneration* 43), he echoes a similar loss of faith in the ability of language to encapsulate these new experiences of terror akin to the seemingly closed, self-referential symbols of physical objects – words, paper, books, empty rooms – used by Foer to draw our attention to the incomprehensibility of such acts of war as those which decimated Dresden and Hiroshima, or which brought down the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. In Foer’s portrayal each of these acts can be

seen to be imbued with “the dulled disorientation that follows the helpless, hopeless witnessing of collective death” (Hoffman 238) – a disorientation repeatedly enacted through a painful disabling of narrativisation. While this very failure of language to encompass an unfathomable event works to accentuate the enormity of that event, it also leaves these unexplained acts outside the rationalising continuum of literary discourse. Ihab Hassan argues that silence implies “alienation from reason, society and history, a reduction of all engagements in the created world of men, perhaps an abrogation of any communal existence” (13), yet the silence of Prior, Marquand and even Schell represents a highly rational distancing or disjunction of language from the realm of reason, social discourse and history.

### **“Write encouragingly to friends at the front” – the pact of war**

While Prior does make some attempt to communicate through the use of his notepad, even though at this stage he has no recollection of the event that initiated his inability to speak (his use of capital letters to make his message “CLEARER” brings neither him nor Rivers any closer to the truth [*Regeneration* 42]), the silence of Marquand in *Islands of Silence* denotes a concentrated and rational determination to withhold the truth from those around him. In his resolute silence Marquand echoes Friedrich Nietzsche’s avowal in *The Gay Science* (1882) to “proceed as Raphael did and never paint another image of torture. There are enough sublime things so that one does not have to look for the sublime where it dwells in sisterly association with cruelty” (250). Such a carefully construed response does suggest a sanity that is entirely missing from the general madness that he witnesses during his brief term of duty during World War I. As Marquand contemplates the death of fellow soldier Edward Tanner, shot by his superiors during an attempt to desert his unit, he reasons that Tanner’s bid for freedom “was a vain search for something normal in an abnormal world, where death hummed like an angry bee . . . [H]e couldn’t know how the world was spinning uncontrolled towards a madness he could never have envisioned in his wildest nightmares” (57). Prior too describes the irrationality that saw trainee soldiers riding bareback on horses, as if “somewhere at the back of their . . . *tiny tiny* minds they really do believe the whole thing’s going to end in one big glorious *cavalry charge*” (*Regeneration* 66). In *Birdy* Al alludes to a similar sense of wartime madness against which his friend’s bizarre bird-like behaviour seems relatively sane. “What’s crazy?” he asks. “Wars are crazy for sure” (44), and later: “What’s the use talking about it. I only want Birdy to know he’s not alone thinking the world is shitty” (183). And certainly, what is the use? What do we, the civilians for whom these characters supposedly went to war, do with such knowledge? As Evelyn Cobley says in her account of World War I texts, writers were cautious about narrative descriptions of this war, fearing that “the rendering of a destructive violence never before imagined would devalue the world they had fought to preserve” (117). In light of the atrocities of two world wars what could be said to help preserve this suddenly mythical world? The decision by many potential recorders of truth to opt for – or descend into – silence is an apt response to this question.

Is there any way, Fussell asks, “of compromising between the reader’s expectations that written history ought to be interesting and meaningful and the cruel fact that much of what happens – all of what happens? – is inherently without ‘meaning’?” (172). Fussell has already identified this compromise in his recognition of the widespread use of irony in twentieth-century depictions of war: “Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected. Every war constitutes an irony of situation because its means are so melodramatically disproportionate to its presumed ends. In the Great War eight million people were destroyed because two persons, the Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his Consort, had been shot” (7-8). Looking down on the trench lines from the air, Cecil Day Lewis described the system of dugouts as having “all the elements of a grotesque comedy – a prodigious and complex effort, cunningly contrived, and carried out with deadly seriousness, in order to achieve just nothing at all” (qtd. in Fussell, 201) and Prior himself is not immune to the ridiculous spectacle of a Commanding Officer toasting St George’s Day in the trenches of France, or the ludicrous tactic of walking straight from the trenches into enemy gunfire:

“And you start walking. *Not* at the double. Normal walking speed.” Prior started to smile. “In a straight line. Across open country. In broad daylight. Towards a line of machine-guns.” He shook his head. “Oh, and of course you’re being shelled all the way.” (*Regeneration* 78)

Such a ridiculous spectacle – such “an extremely ridiculous event” (*Regeneration* 78) – and the resulting black humour that appeared in creative responses to the “war to end all wars” was, Fussell suggests, a bleak indictment of the complete irrationality that tried to align old-fashioned notions of glory and honour with a long, dirty, drawn-out war (Fussell quotes lines from a London newspaper advertisement aimed at boosting morale: “How the Civilian May Help in This Crisis. Be Cheerful. Write encouragingly to friends at the front” [17]). Copley describes the language of World War I writers as comprising a curiously “deflated, objective middle style of scientific-historic discourse”, lacking in any “metaphorical exuberance, syntactical experimentation, lexical ostentation and any other strategy drawing attention to words as word” (95). This was a valid attempt by writers to safeguard the gravity of their subject – and the embarrassing validity of their account – by avoiding any hyperbole or other literary tricks open to accusations of inappropriateness or vacuous exaggeration. At the same time, however, the use of irony and the imposition of “farce and comedy onto the blank horrors or meaningless vacancies of experience” (Fussell 207) as embraced by avant garde movements (and that is all too evident when aligning the extremity of murder and torture with the deflated discourse identified by Copley), was vividly evoked in dadaist art and poetry (and later reiterated in the absurdist black comedy *Catch 22* [1961] by Joseph Heller).

Added to the reality of zealous warfare conducted in mud-filled trenches with antiquated arms and outdated strategies is the irony that those who choose not to acknowledge the essential irrationality of war – and



withdrawing from social discourse is a sure sign of non-acknowledgement – are themselves labelled mad or psychotic. The silence of Prior in *Regeneration*, Armstrong in *Anthem*, Birdy and Marquand is deemed to be proof of *their* madness. This paradigm is intrinsic to the complex relationship between a traumatic event and its witness since “whether or not an event is traumatic can only be established by the existence of witnesses whose trauma both authenticates them and the reality of the traumatic event . . . [The] witness is an indexical sign or symptom of the reality of the event, the experience of which prevents the witness from communicating in normal modes” (Douglass and Vogler 36). Thus the authenticity of the “indexical sign” that is the witness comes under question simply because they are incapable of communicating in “normal modes”. As a result, the non-communicative witness becomes the indexical sign, albeit a sign defined by the very ineffability of the experience he or she has witnessed.

Detached from their communities physically, socially and verbally, these figures harbour not only the pain of war but also the madness of a civilisation that practises or condones it yet which is reluctant to confront its effects. In *Regeneration* Prior is an outcast in every sphere: he was bullied as a child; he crossed the strict class boundaries in becoming an officer, so leaving him, as his father says, “neither fish nor fowl” (57); his defensiveness and sharp tongue do not incline staff or fellow patients to warm to him; he later works as a spy for the Ministry of Munitions; and, as a witness to wartime atrocity, he stands apart from those not privy to such truth. After making a day trip to the seaside, he tells Rivers with some justification, “‘I felt as if I came from another planet’” (134). In *Islands of Silence* Marquand draws the distinction between those who are undeniably ill or delusional and his own lonely position as a voluntary exile from the communality of speech selected as a response to the unequivocal nature of the terror that he has witnessed. As he contemplates the overtly psychotic behaviour of another hospital inmate, he thinks, “He knows not who he is, yet I . . . I know who I am. I am the man who, because he dares not speak of obscenity, can not deny it” (128). If the memorialisation of events serves as a bulwark against the true horror of war – the “beyond of memory” (Kramer 175) – Marquand, in contrast to his stepfather’s idealisation of his own Boer War experiences, refuses, or is denied, any such bulwark. He thus lives with an unedited and uncommemorated truth translated into short clips of memory at odds with the more acceptable, narrativised reminiscences held within the collective vessels of “books, libraries, archives, recordings, icons and monuments” (Crapanzano 156).

While the novel is, as Lukács argues, based on hope, a future, and an outcome determined by human will when “the gods are silent and neither sacrifices nor the ecstatic gift of tongues can solve their riddle” (66), many of these characters have lost not only the voices of their pre-war selves but also any semblance of innocence or faith in the human. Where once language signified the normal, orderly world of behaviour and relationships, silence now serves to represent a loss that is sudden, dramatic and enduring, like a sentence cut off midstream or the ceaseless current of water pouring out of Friday’s mouth in the final, dream-like episode of Coetzee’s *Foe*. In these instances there is no hope of starting again where the speaker left off. As we encounter mutism as a forced

or voluntary outcome of terror and trauma, we find repeated allusions to such despair – not the shock of the extent of human brutality but a deeper, more permanent sense of loss epitomised by the journey undertaken by Hanna X and her companions into the heart of the Namibian desert in Brink’s *The Other Side of Silence* as discussed in the last chapter: “This is what it means to move into the interior, she thinks. Not arriving on a boat, meeting people, talking to strangers, bringing with one a language made beyond the seas, bestowing words on things – stone, bush, root, earth, sky – but walking into it, merging with it, body to body” (163).

Just as Prior initially resists Rivers’s attempts to help him to uncover what happened to him on the battlefields of France – he is adamant that he cannot remember yet he refuses to even discuss his dreams and is clearly concerned that he may have spoken aloud during one of his regular nightmares – so Marquand in *Islands of Silence* rejects the attempts of young Dr Belasco to make him talk. While Prior eventually does express his readiness to confront his buried experiences, actually pleading to be put under hypnosis so that he can regain his memory, Marquand remains obstinately silent, describing himself as having arrived at a point far beyond the human range of anger, shock or outrage: “There is nothing left that can provoke anger in me. My rage is spent, its flame extinguished and its anguish veiled behind my quietude. All I have left are a few unexpurgated and unexpungeable regrets” (12). The use of the word “unexpungeable” is significant. Like the mute mother in Deane’s *Reading in the Dark*, only death can obliterate his terrible knowledge. Such quiet despair signifies Marquand’s acceptance of the fact that he is left with information that brands him permanently as the mute witness. According to Hoffman, “it is one of the added injustices in the wake of so much injustice that the burden of brutality is carried, not only in its occurrence but in its aftermath, not by the abuser but by the abused” (112) and, in assuming this burden albeit as a traumatised rather than an abused character, Marquand ensures that the aftermath of the brutality of war is not extended beyond the fortifications of his own mind.

Prior similarly rejects Rivers’s suggestion that there are those at Craiglockhart willing to hear his wartime story:

Everybody’s either lost somebody, or knows somebody who has. They don’t want the truth. It’s like letters of condolence. “Dear Mrs Bloggs, Your son had the side of his head blown off by a shell and took five hours to die. We did manage to give him a decent Christian burial. Unfortunately that particular stretch of ground came under heavy bombardment the day after, so George has been back to see us five or six times since then.” They don’t want that. They want to be told that George – or Johnny – or whatever his name was, died a quick death and was given a decent burial. (134)

While for Prior speechlessness is a subconscious act of repressing extreme fear or revulsion, for Marquand it is an enclave where the pain of his wartime experiences and his love for the mute girl on the island Eilean Tosdach

can both be held tight within the body with reassuring permanence. Rivers informs Prior that mutism seems to spring from “a conflict between *wanting* to say something, and knowing that if you *do* say it the consequences will be disastrous” (96). He goes on to place this response within the British class system, arguing that, while officers may respond to trauma by such psychological ailments as stammering, for the labouring classes “illness *has* to physical. They can’t take their symptoms seriously unless there’s a physical symptom” (96). Marquand, clearly from Britain’s more privileged classes, has what Rivers may describe as the luxury of electing not to talk. His silence thus adheres to what André Neher describes as a working silence, the selected guise of the mute protagonist, a man “who only plays at being dumb, who takes silence upon himself as a role” (45). Neher writes that in the Bible (and Booth’s account of Marquand’s silence is equated with a bizarre experiment in seeking the true language of God), “It is rare that silence is only a pause due to some weariness of language. The absence of a word corresponds nearly always to a deliberate desire to be silent” (17-18). Certainly, Marquand’s silence is not symptomatic of linguistic ineptitude; rather, it is an active, often difficult concealment of the truth, an act of defiance as “courageous” as any act of bravery on the battlefield as he leaves the remaining fragments of testimony prey to disbelief or accusations of exaggeration and hearsay.

Compared to the frantic activity of the violence of war the strangely still state of the victim of, or witness to, atrocity sits between the harrowing process of re-experience and the equally shocking unaffectedness of official, collective disclosure. In *The Eye in the Door* Rivers explains how “the essential factor in the production of war neurosis among the two most vulnerable groups, observers and trench soldiers, was the peculiarly passive, dependent and immobile nature of their experience” (63). This passivity, of body as well as of voice, continues in a neurotic post-war response to this trauma, just as it did for the non-combative experience of Norah, sitting in dramatic passivity on the footpath in Shield’s *Unless*. As Hoffman argues, the trenches of World War I instilled a terrible sense of powerlessness in those involved: “Is impotence in the face of horror the traumatic element in trauma? Is it the loss of agency that makes for the crushing of personality, for that deep shame – no matter how irrational – that seems to affect so many survivors of atrocities?” (41). In *The Ha-Ha* Kapostach slips time and again into an almost inhuman immobility. He retreats from his friends, flatmates and employer (even his workplace is the sheltered gardens of a convent), constantly seeking refuge from prying, questioning eyes. Lying on the floor in his room in a moment of dark melancholy, he resigns himself to his alienation from those around him: “I make friends with the dust. I’m not sure exactly what I’m after, but it has to do with obliteration and lying here always, until I’m nothing but bones inside a quilt on the floorboards” (300) and certainly, this retreat from humanity and social discourse – this retreat from life – is symptomatic of many victims of or witnesses to wartime atrocity. Dislocated from his idea of his pre-war self – “a different and optimistic and talkative person” (280) – Kapostach’s world is irretrievably fractured: “Some desert realm had sprung up between my mind and my lips, where ideas – of my mother, for example – inevitably languished in passage, never completing the transformation that brought *mum* into bloom” (280). Erratic in emotion, prone –

like Prior – to nightmares and tantrums then periods of complete withdrawal, Kapostach describes his new coping self as “the king of control” (11), but it is a warped, despairing and often incomplete sense of control as all attempts at communication are imbued with his rage over the loss of his former self and the extent to which his silence and his disfigured face are misread by those around him (his flatmate Laurel has to explain to the boy Ryan the difference between physical and intellectual impairment; she goes on to write a sign that Kapostach can use to assure strangers that he is “of normal intelligence” [37] – a comment alluding in its very simplicity to the far from normal psychological damage he has incurred).

Throughout *Fugitive Pieces* Michaels also describes such moments of stillness, blackness and silence as instances when humanity dies, when the world alters, when the knowledge of human atrocity draws colour, voice and action away from those afflicted. The murder of his parents by Nazi soldiers as he is hiding in a cupboard fractures the young life of Jakob Beer: “Blackness filled me, spread from the back of my head into my eyes as if my brain had been punctured. Spread from stomach to legs. I gulped and gulped, swallowing it whole” (7). Later he lies on the floor of Athos’s cliff-top house (to avoid the risk of arrest Jakob spends most of the Occupation years hiding behind and under things – in the cupboard, in the ground, inside Athos’s coat, in a sea chest, in a small bedroom), “willing my skin to take on the wood grain of the floor, to take on the pattern of the rug or the bedcover, so I could disappear simply by stillness” (18).

### **“Those benighted souls”: the exile of the silent ones**

In discussing Albert Camus’s *The Fall* Shoshana Felman describes what she sees as a “positive avoidance – and erasure – of one’s hearing” and “the voiding of the act of witnessing of a reality whose transmission to awareness is obstructed and whose content is insistently denied as known” (“Camus’ *The Fall*” 183). *The Fall*, she argues, “rethinks the ways in which the ‘making’ of a history is tied up with makings of a *silence* (faire silence) intent upon *not knowing* and *not looking*” (“Camus’ *The Fall*” 183). In its resistance to articulated thought, a character’s speechlessness acts as an acknowledgement, a measurable gauge, of the extent of pain or terror endured by the victim, even if, as in Prior’s case, the traumatic event is temporarily beyond the scope of personal memory. As Scarry observes, “our instincts salute the incommensurability of pain by preventing its entry into worldly discourse. . . . Besides the initial fact of pain, all further elaborations – that it violates this or that human principle, that it can be objectified this or that way, that it is amplified here, that it is disguised there – all those seem trivializations, a missing of the point, a missing of the pain” (60). In *Anthem* we see the injuries to the body, here the horrifically mutilated face of Armstrong, through the eyes of the other characters, and we share their reactions of fear and/or revulsion – reactions that hint at the atrocities done to him but which repel any further investigation into his experiences. It is this lack of exploration, Alexander argues, that resists the inclusion of the witness to or victim of atrocity into the reading “we”:

It is by constructing cultural traumas that social groups, national societies, and sometimes even entire civilizations not only cognitively identify the existence and source of human suffering but “take on board” some significant responsibility for it. Insofar as they identify the cause of trauma, and thereby assume such moral responsibility, members of collectivities define their solidarity relationships in ways that, in principle, allow them to share the suffering of others. Is the sufferings of others also our own? In thinking that it might in fact be, societies expand the circle of the we. By the same token, social groups can, and often do, refuse to recognize the existence of others’ trauma, and because of their failure they cannot achieve a moral stance. By denying the reality of others’ suffering, people not only diffuse their own responsibility for their own suffering but often project the responsibility for their suffering on those others. In other words, by refusing to participate in what I will describe as the process of trauma creation, social groups restrict solidarity, leaving others to suffer alone. (1)

Certainly, the horror with which the face of the traumatised Armstrong is regarded is symptomatic of a society reluctant to recognise or take responsibility for the horrific personal damage resulting from an act of war conducted by one’s own country.

Foer’s account of the bombing of Dresden in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, and its effect on the lives and functionality of at least one family, is a rare viewpoint in western literature. W. G. Sebald, describing the dearth of German response to this massive assault on a city, says that such a level of destruction “on a scale without historical precedent, entered the annals of the nation as it set about rebuilding itself only in the form of vague generalizations. It seems to have left scarcely a trace of pain behind in the collective consciousness, it has been largely obliterated from the retrospective understanding of those affected, and it never played an appreciable part in the discussion of the internal constitution of our country” (3-4). The sense of “unparalleled national humiliation” felt by the German population in the last years of the world, he says, “had never really found verbal expression, and those directly affected by the experience neither shared it with each other nor passed it on to the next generation” (viii). Such cultural amnesia is an attempt to obscure a world:

that could no longer be presented in comprehensible terms. There was a tacit agreement, equally binding on everyone, that the true state of material and moral ruin in which the country found itself was not to be described. The darkest aspects of the final act of destruction, as experienced by the great majority of the German population, remained under a kind of taboo like a shameful family secret. (9-10)

Such an analysis brings to mind the shame of the young boy's family destroyed by the knowledge of past crimes in Deane's *Reading in the Dark*, or Lucy's uncomplaining silence as a white woman paying with her body – and later her silence – for the crimes of apartheid in Coetzee's *Disgrace*, as well as the inarticulate, jarring drumming fits of Oskar in Gunter Grass's *The Tin Drum* (1962). Yet such a silence, endorsed by political guilt or shame, can also work to hold the victim in a permanent state of victimhood, as is evident in the frightening complicity between a rapist and his silent victim as portrayed in Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. In instances of rape or personal attack the silent victim can be seen to collude with the perpetrator, a complicity that endures for as long as the silence endures. As Jean-François Lyotard explains, "the 'perfect crime' does not consist in killing the victim or the witnesses (that adds new crimes to the first one and aggravates the difficulty of effacing everything), but rather in obtaining the silence of the witnesses, the deafness of the judges, and the inconsistency (insanity) of the testimony" (*Differend* 8). In instances of war this sense of complicity is extended to a level of national aggression or betrayal as mistakes and acts of barbarity against fellow members of the armed forces are left unexposed or are passed off as meaningless rantings of disturbed minds. The aggressor, in this case the military hierarchy, is thus protected by the silence of the witness in a degrading relationship that maintains the *idea* of war in a mythic realm of just conflict and orderly battle. One of Prior's most harrowing memories is the encounter of a patroller with what he thought to be a German wiring party. His men opened fire until somebody realised "there were British voices on both sides. Five men killed. Eleven injured. I looked at [the patroller's] face as he sat in the dugout . . . You could have done *that* and he wouldn't've blinked. Before I'd always thought the worst thing would be if you were wounded and left out there, but when I saw his face I thought, no. This is the worst thing" (*Regeneration* 105).

In their knowledge, whether articulated or not, those privy to the truth tend to live in social exile, either voluntarily or not. If in the supposedly normal world we are protected from "the existential terror of enveloping madness by our capacity to isolate its victims physically" (Clendinnen 43), then this protection serves to maintain the "innocence" of untainted human communality at the expense of the knowing victim or witness. As a response to war or terror such an exile serves as a distorted mirror to the socially acceptable sanctity of sacred silence – a macabre alignment when considering the lack of anything resembling the divine in the actions or reactions of those involved in such acts of extreme violence. For Prior, silence is the final outcome not only of the ghoulish discovery of one of his men's eyeballs but also of weeks in water-filled dugouts, trenches that face the wrong way, compasses that don't work, weed that smells like gas, military tactics that see young men running straight into enemy gunfire. Prior's breakdown, Rivers suggests, is thus the result of "erosion" – months of stress "in a situation where you can't get away from it" (105).

In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* Schell's lapse into complete silence occurs slowly, painfully. As he says, "I haven't always been silent, I used to talk and talk and talk and talk, I couldn't keep my mouth shut. The silence overtook me like a cancer" (16). The first name he "forgets" is that of his pregnant lover Anna,

killed in the bombing of Dresden. One by one other words desert him, the last to go being simply “I” as he succumbs to an anguish that is both all-encompassing and ongoing: “The end of suffering does not justify the suffering, and so there is no end to suffering,” he says (33).

The silence in these texts is thus the silence of aloneness, rather than that signifying proximity to a higher being or order of meaning. In some instances, however, comparisons are drawn. In *Islands of Silence* Marquand tries to unravel the history of an old Scottish broch, or tower, and the secrets of the neighbouring Eilean Tosdach, the “Island of Silence”. While he trawls through the stones of the broch for ancient relics, the local innkeeper, Ogilvy, describes the barbaric experiment by King James IV of Scotland who, in 1490, placed two newborn infants on an island with a deaf mute spinster in order to discover the true, God-given language of the chosen people. According to legend, the two infants began speaking Hebrew. Over five hundred years later, the innkeeper explains, a Celtic revivalist by the name of Robert MacIntyre, repeated the bizarre experiment, placing the illegitimate child of a maidservant in virtual imprisonment on Eilean Tosdach beyond the sound of any human voice. By the time Marquand arrives, the child has grown into a young woman, incapable of any other sound than that of the plaintive imitations of bird cries. As the innkeeper says, ““The girl had been condemned to a life of virtual imprisonment, on an island, without words. I tried to imagine what it must be like not to be able to speak, to possess only the bark and call of a dog or a seabird”” (117). It is a story of almost Shakespearean tragedy, yet the key elements of this tragedy – autocratic power, deluded zealotry and an idealised reading of a mythic past – are also the key elements of Marquand’s present-day incarceration in silence.

If, as Crapanzano says, pain is a leitmotif in the trajectory of language from “a natural language of feeling to a discriminating language of reflection, from immediate sounding through . . . to that sounding’s written representation” (83) then both Marquand and the girl are trapped at opposing ends of that spectrum surrounding, but not embracing, articulated thought. The “bark and call” of the girl is a painful and pitiable response to indescribable emotion, akin to Prior’s meaningless shouts in his nightmares; Marquand’s silence is the furthest point of intellectual reflection on the pain of human barbarism. Both refer to a central midpoint – that which is human, communal and conversant – from which they deviate in their respective degrees of isolation.

Silence works not only as a self-protective device. It also serves to protect a community – the other characters in the book and us as the readers – from being forced to acknowledge the facts of wartime brutality. Those returning from the war, says Hoffman, found that their experiences had created “an invisible, unbridgeable barrier between the two [worlds], that they had travelled into regions from which no tales could be brought back and that had condemned them to speechlessness and solitude – that icy isolation which, in the aftermath of violence, is both a feature of deep suffering and an agent of its increase” (41). Silence is thus part of a social tryst that mutes Coetzee’s once unbearable newscasts and smothers any need to confront truth and the accompanying blame, guilt, disgust, outrage or any expectation of action. In *Birdy*, Al’s disgust at a world where no one really talks, where no one really listens, where, “Everybody’s only strutting around, pecking and picking”

(271), accentuates the isolation of those who know, those who have seen. Ex-serviceman Jim Cusack described this sense of estrangement after returning to his home in New Zealand at the end of World War II: “Nobody in New Zealand understood what we went through. A lot of people don’t even believe now if you tell them stories, because they were too far away from the war. . . . They didn’t know what the war was about” (Parr 155-56).

As witnesses to, or participants in, acts of war the mute characters in these works are thus the holders of the knowledge of their own nations’ culpability. In *Islands of Silence* Booth draws the analogy between Marquand as the silent war victim, the witness of man’s worst travesties, and the mythological sineaters who wandered the countryside absolving the sins of those who died without confession – by tasting the bread and salt left on the dead bodies they absorbed the unforgiven sins into their own body. These thankless creatures were despised, feared, weighed down by the sins of humanity, and they carried on this thankless task until the hag, the Baba Yaga, led them to their deaths:

[The sineater’s] knowledge of evil would surpass that of all others. Not a secret of history would be unknown to him for in him reposed the very essence of evil, distilled into one vessel from which no living being could remove the bung. . . . Sometimes, I think I am one of those benighted souls, condemned to walk the earth until the moment of their last wheeze and stutter, carrying the burden of a million sins in the marrow of my bones and the corpuscles of my blood. For I have seen the iniquity of men and have partaken of it, have consumed the flesh and transgressions of another, drawing them into my body and am, therefore, damned. (225-26)

In a monstrous degeneration of the religious idea of the chosen one, Marquand volunteers to be the one who will hold the knowledge of human atrocity secure from the rest of his community, a position conferred on him and by him by his having unwittingly tasted human flesh. The prospect of negotiating the truth is simply too dangerous both for him and for his potential listeners, for “once I start to speak I know that it will be like uncorking a never-empty bottle containing all the evil ever devised by man and would not wish to subject [the nurse] to the torrent of despair and degradation to which I have been privy” (85).

Marquand’s silence is thus an obligatory attempt to protect the world from a confrontation with horror. If, he thinks, the medical staff in the hospital were to drill a hole in his head “not a single demon would escape for they, like me, are hidden, deep out of reach. Even when I am dead and my skull an empty void, they will be out of harm’s way, out of the range of those who would rescue me from them yet still going about their evil business in the world of men” (98). Later he thinks, “The human body is nothing but a castle waiting to be ruined, its moat bridged, its ramparts scaled and its chambers ransacked. We may think we are secure in our house of flesh, yet our walls are made of straw and our roof of tinder. Only the mansions of the mind cannot be breached” (151). This statement is reminiscent of Barton’s description of the speechless Friday in *Foe* – until he regains the



power of communication, she thinks, he will remain like the whales, “great castles of flesh floating leagues apart” (59), but while Barton considers these fleshy creatures to be devoid of sentience Booth sees the physical body as an ultimately breachable shield within which the mind can, through silence, remain inviolate. While Marquand is bemused by the hospital’s determination to release him from what they suspect to be “some form of mental anguish . . . a confusion of anxieties and doubts, fears and repressions” (95), reminiscent of Rivers’s encouragement of Prior to remember his story, his speechlessness becomes the final sanctuary for memories that, he believes, need to be held beyond human knowledge. Holed up in his silence, like a rabbit in a burrow or a ravaged king sheltering in his crumbling castle, he, as does Erlene in Frame’s *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, resists the attempts of Belasco to “break my barriers down, storm my barricades and loot the fortress of my soul” (183).

As one of the few characters in this investigation never reverts to speech, Marquand reveals a strange sense of contentment in a job well done – as he says, he will never allow the demons of truth to escape, he is committed to keeping the truth “out of harm’s way” (98). Yet, alongside this successful resistance to full disclosure, there is also doubt. Marquand admits to a “cardinal omission” – the possession of a fragment of knowledge “of which the world should know. I should have passed it on: however, I have not” (163). This fragment of knowledge, this understanding that “there is something terribly wrong about the world” (164), is the vague but terrible truth that haunts many of these novels, a truth that may well linger on the boundaries of imagination but which lies in full testimony only in the silence of these characters. Marquand’s final decision not to relinquish his knowledge suggests an acceptance of the process by which some information is censored, filtered or drip-fed to the recipient. Never does he question his role as keeper of society’s cruelest secrets; never, except for silently revealing his penciled sketches of the girl on the island (the caption “She is yours” suggesting a passing on of responsibility for the young woman to the doctor) is he tempted to let loose his knowledge amongst those around him. This relationship between the mute figure and those characters left with their innocence intact mimics the precarious relationship between the author and the reader in negotiating information that is unpalatable, shocking or condemnatory. The authors discussed here clearly do not shy away from their subjects, but they, like the mute characters in these texts, are aware of the pitfalls of direct exposition. Their use of speechlessness, embedded in fragmented viewpoints, discontinuous narratives and the collage-like presentation of such material, is an acknowledgement of the difficulty in relaying information concerning human acts of atrocity without casting the reader into the position of horrifying voyeurism or numb distaste as he or she endeavours to respond to a truth that, “because it is offered like the Gorgon’s head to terrorize the populace and paralyze resistance, deserves to be ignored” (Coetzee, “Dark Chamber” 366). Montiglio explains that silence in classical Greece, “within the frame of the democratic polis, means expulsion and marks marginal conditions” (292) and certainly the mute characters focused on in this investigation, denied the individuality that comes from the exposition of thought or blame and unable to transfer their painful history through speech, fulfill a role

similar to that of the sineater or the traditional exile as the marginalised repository of man's unresolved evil. The chasm between those that know and those that do not thus remains uncrossed, their silence and their physical beings merely indicating the existence and the extent of that abyss.

In "certain Oriental metaphysics," writes Steiner:

the highest, purest reach of the contemplative act is that which has learned to leave language behind it. . . . It can only be by breaking through the walls of language that visionary observance can enter the world of total and immediate understanding. Where such understanding is attained, the truth need no longer suffer the impurities and fragmentation that speech necessarily entails. (30)

In many of the texts studied here, however, "breaking through the walls of language" is not a key to uplifting contemplation, pure or otherwise – it is in the silence of these characters that terror makes itself present through the unmediated experience of pain and horror. As Hassan explains, in twentieth-century texts the state of alienation came to be seen as "pathetic and tragic rather than heroic" (12) and writers such as Coetzee, Morrison, Wiesel, Booth, Ondaatje, Deane and Foer all work to ensure that neither heroism nor inspirational contemplation successfully compete with the emotional pain signified by these states of harrowed and harrowing speechlessness. Indeed, no matter how great the anticipation of utterance, silence in response to war or terror is widely supported by those who are not victims of – or witnesses to – such acts. In colluding with the accepted – and relatively easy – ineffability of atrocity, those who are not personally affected are able to ignore any expectations of empathy, revenge or compensation. As Manning says in *The Eye in the Door*, people are "saturated with tragedy, they simply can't respond any more" (272). According to Sontag, images which show tens, hundreds, thousands of victims – images that began to flood the media with the increasing popularity of photography and film during the twentieth century – somehow fail to exact empathy or identification:

Making suffering loom larger . . . may spur people to feel they ought to "care" more. It also invites them to feel that the sufferings and misfortunes are too vast, too irrevocable, too epic to be much changed by any political intervention. With a subject conceived on this scale, compassion can only flounder – and make abstract. (70-71)

In a 1964 letter to the London *Daily Telegraph*, commenting on the torture of Viet-Cong prisoners by South Vietnamese troops, Graham Greene noted that, "The strange new feature about the photographs of torture now appearing in the British and American press is that they have been taken with the approval of the torturers and are published over captions that contain no hint of condemnation. They might have come out of a book on insect life" (qtd. in Améry 122). If, as Scarry says, war entails the participation of a massive number of people, only a

small fraction of whom are “engaged in the active verbal advocacy of either the elimination or the perpetuation of war” (65), then the ensuing silence is, as Greene suggests, due not only to the fact that torture shocks the humane mind but also to the fact that revelations of atrocity can be undertaken – are undertaken – with an alarming degree of unaffectedness. In the film *Hotel Rwanda* (2004) an American journalist sums up this notion of empathy fatigue when he explains to the Hutu hotel manager that his film footage of the massacre of local Tutsis will not necessarily result in western intervention: “People [in the West] will look at their TVs and say ‘Oh, that’s terrible’, and then keep on eating their dinner.”

The silence surrounding wartime experience thus serves two purposes: it protects, or is expected to protect, the victim or witness from reliving the traumatic experience, while also allowing the potential listener, those who were not directly involved, to avoid confrontation with unpalatable truths – truths that appear to require a form of response that is both uncertain and ultimately inadequate. While the other characters in these novels are, like the reader, uninformed about the exact details of the events of murder, torture or inhumane death, the voice of pain that responds to these acts of terror is successfully heightened through its silence. If the daily deluge of stories of atrocity through the media is, as Sontag argues, prompting us to lose our capacity to react, if compassion “stretched to the limits, is going numb” (96), then the mute character serves to preserve the reality of human barbarity while, in limiting access to such events, also avoiding the risks that I suggest are inherent in an overly graphic or narrativised depiction of human pain.

### **“Shotvarfet! Shotvarfet!”: a manner of speaking**

While William Rivers argued in favour of confronting traumatic memories during the period of his supervision at Craiglockhart (although in *Regeneration* he needs to be persuaded to hypnotise Prior), the repression of such thoughts was, nevertheless, also widely promoted. Patients suffering from war neurosis were encouraged, presumably for their own good as well as for the comfort of society at large, to banish all thoughts of war from their minds. Rivers concluded his 1917 speech to the Royal School of Medicine by deprecating this “ostrich-like policy” of attempting to banish painful memories from the mind, yet he also agreed that dwelling on pain ad infinitum was problematic. As Hoffman says, after World War I many of the soldiers fell silent, and many of their “near and dear preferred not to listen” (41). Certainly, in Barker’s trilogy, in times of exhaustion or exasperation, Rivers himself privately wishes to be spared the experiences of this seemingly endless supply of young and damaged men. In *The Ghost Road* he reiterates this ambivalence towards articulation and silence in his treatment of returned soldiers: “Every day of [his] working life he looked at twitching mouths that had once been clenched. Go on, he said, though rarely in so many words, cry. It’s all right to grieve. Breakdown’s nothing to be ashamed of – the pressures were intolerable. But, also, stop crying. Get up on your feet. Walk. He both distrusted that silence and endorsed it” (96). This ambivalence belongs to the listener and the reader as much as to the doctor. Rivers could well be echoing the unspoken thoughts of many who were not at the front line, those

friends, families and well-meaning readers suggesting that it is good to let go, to talk, while at the same time being all too aware of their own reluctance to hear the truth and, perhaps, despising the weakness of confession. Even on a domestic level the context of war established an environment in which acts could be committed in the knowledge that they would remain outside the realm of social discourse. In *Anthem*, Armstrong's account of his experiences in the Falklands War runs alongside the description of England's VE day celebrations marking the end of the war in Europe. As young Marjorie celebrates the long night with uncharacteristic sexual abandon she knows that the truth of that night will remain unspoken: "It wasn't only at the front that unspoken things had happened. Everyone had experienced a secret war, and everyone shared in the hiding of that secret, a secret they all shared and which no one would ever divulge" (394). In "Excessive Witnessing" Zulaika describes the reaction of a group of women to the murder of a neighbour: "It was a moment of inexcusable tragedy, of complete silence. Any word of response to the unanswerable question (how can that be?), any excuse for the act, would have sounded sacrilegious. Only complete silence was morally appropriate" (104). But, like Coleridge's wedding guest, we are compelled, albeit uncomfortable listeners – compelled by the uneasy titillation of terror and by the contemporary cultural endorsement of the value of expression and confession. In parallel with this uneasy greed to *know* there is, for the victims of atrocity, the anticipated luxury of utterance. In *Regeneration* each time Rivers threatens to end his session with Prior, the young officer changes his demeanour so that the conversation will continue, and it is as a result of his entreaties that Rivers agrees to hypnosis. In *Birdy*, Al imagines the sheer relief of not staying silent: "God, it'd be great, just to let go and stop pretending; to let it all out; holler, scream, give Tarzan yells, run up walls or punch them; to spit or piss or shit at anybody who comes near! God, that'd be good! What stops me from doing it? I've been hurt enough; I could do it if I really wanted to. Nobody could blame me" (185).

For many of these characters language continues to hold its promise of final release from unspoken memories. Like Prior amongst the poets of Craiglockhart and Simon in the midst of Kerewin's obsessive monologues in *the bone people*, Jakob in *Fugitive Pieces* finds himself in the care of a character immersed in language following his family's murder. Old Athos is a language expert, remindful of Reta in *Unless* and Palipana in *Anil's Ghost*. As such, he can be seen to have the skills, and the necessary faith in these skills, to assist the survival and emotional recovery of Jakob by repairing the bridge between words and meaning. In many of the texts studied here, such repair work resurrects hope for the restoration of this longed for sense of communion. Scarry argues that "torture and war are acts of destruction (and hence somehow the opposite of creation)" (21). They entail, she says, the suspension of civilization, and are, somehow, "the opposite of civilization" (21). According to this argument, a return to language, no matter how fractured or stuttered, is thus a return to civilization and personal identity (if the voice is lost, says Scarry, so too is the self [22]). In *Anthem*, as Armstrong begins to talk again, it is his own name that he begins to practise in front of the mirror, as if excavating, like Mundy in Dann's *The Silent*, his old self from a recent nightmarish past: "Henry Hawkins.

Henry Hawkins, marvelling at the strange contortions his face had to endure, tracing the outline of his lips, pressing them hard as if to hold back the sound seeping through his fingers: sounds of a lost future” (404). Indeed, while recognising that extreme trauma may strike us dumb, Clendinnen argues that the typical response after a catastrophe is to talk:

As humans we need to feel the need to talk: to find words and images, to organise shaking experience into narrative, to bring the extraordinary back to the ordinary, the “unspeakable” to the spoken . . . . Thus, easily, socially, and of course always retrospectively, we contrive to bridge the gulf between language and experience. (33)

Already we have seen this need to recount the past: Hanna X filling page after page with the truth of her attack in *The Other Side of Silence*; Naomi in Kogawa’s *Obasan*, “tired of living between deaths and funerals, weighted with decorum, unable to shout or sing or dance, unable to scream or swear, unable to laugh, unable to laugh out loud” (218); the women in *Paradise* telling their stories in a candlelit room in an abandoned convent; the scrawled or drawn messages in *Reading in the Dark*, *Speak*, *Unless*, *The World According to Garp* and *Anil’s Ghost* – these acts of narrative serve to reinstate the shocked or terrorised individual back into the long roll of history, absorbing the events that triggered their state of mutism back into the flow of time. As Clendinnen argues, such acts reveal narrative not only as social glue and collective myth-making, but also as part of the road to personal forgetting (33). In translating events back into the pattern of ordered memory – beginning with the silent but evidential body – chaotic reality is converted into an accountable narrative form. Foer draws attention to those instances of welcome if unexpected success in attempts at communication. Oskar’s joy in receiving a response to his many fan letters to Stephen Hawking, the satisfaction as the grandfather fills his son’s empty coffin with his unsent letters, the intercoms and two-way radio between Oskar and his grandmother in the accompanying building – all indicate an unexpected but persistent optimism in terms of overcoming the obstacles to direct communication. Even the grandmother, diligently typing out her life story on a typewriter without a ribbon, declares a trust in the practice of writing, even though the end result – like Hanna X’s written account in *The Other Side of Silence* – remains unread.

The mute figure in these stories of human survival in the aftermath of war, signifies an extended cry of terror. They represent, they *are*, the unfinished word. While they lack the completion or the resolution of the finished sentence, their pain is as permanently inscribed on the body as Schell’s “YES” and “NO” are tattooed, stigmata-like, on to the palms of his hands. Yet this pain also serves to remind the victims, the observers and the readers that there still remain unuttered truths, experiences to which we do not as yet want to be privy. The lack of receptiveness to such experiences is identified by Rivers as he listens to the last painful cries of the dying Hallet in Barker’s *Ghost Road*. Over and over, louder and louder, the voice of this disfigured human testimony

to war shouts out from his hospital bed “Shotvarfet! Shotvarfet! Shotvarfet!” (274). It is a voice no one wants to hear – even his family wish it would be quickly silenced in death. But from the other beds more voices join in, a last strangled verdict: “It’s not worth it! It’s not worth it! It’s not worth it!” – inhuman cries that die in a remote hospital room far from the ears of those who command the desecration of the human body and mind, far from the eyes of those who would prefer not to see the price society demands of its people in the name of war.

## 4

**“Hardly presentable corpses”: writing the Holocaust**

Lip knew, Lip knows.

Lip dumbs it to the end

– (from Celan, “In Mundhohe” Olschner 381)

“The world of Auschwitz,” wrote Steiner, “lies outside speech as it lies outside reason” (146). This comment is not a literal pronouncement that the Holocaust cannot, or must not, be spoken about (Steiner himself wrote extensively on the subject); rather it suggests that the idealistic assumptions that linked language to a sense of humanity, intelligence and the pursuit of goals for the welfare of society as a whole – assumptions inherited from the Enlightenment – could not be applied to the events which occurred within the Nazi death camps. Many critics and writers have endorsed Steiner’s sentiment; the Holocaust, it seems, undermined the humane and civilised function of language to such an extent that a permanent injury was inflicted on the power of speech to represent truth. It marked a point at which language failed in its humanist role of increasing knowledge, benevolence and communication, of affirming the value and potential of the human. In discussing the impact of the Holocaust on our Romantic heritage, Langer writes:

[The] infinitude of spirit dwindles to the defeating body, physical despair; the inviolable self ebbs into the violated self, defenseless against the fury of power; the idea of the future as a dream of unbounded possibility and automatic progress subsides into a nightmare of violence and annihilation, an abrupt end to everything we consider human. (*Art from the Ashes* 4)

Certainly, in the face of such a chaotic falling apart of recognisable codes of human behaviour and the idealism associated with modernity, the orderly habit of language struggles to withstand what Hoffman describes as “the suction hold of unreason” (13). For writers of literature, the systemic brutality and killings of the Holocaust also drew attention to the ethical arguments concerning the appropriation of such material for the purpose of art, as described by Robert Macdonald in his introduction to Kosinski’s *The Painted Bird*:

The position of the artist in dealing with material of this nature is particularly difficult. As the one man whose imagination should be capable of mastering such material, he is necessarily compelled to try to do so. Yet it is the nature of artistic experience that, if it cannot be directly absorbed as being immediately relevant to its audience, it will inevitably degenerate more or less into a purely aesthetic stimulus, exciting or depressing as this case may be. The aesthetes of the 'nineties used as their rallying-cry "Art-for-Art's-sake", because they wished to oppose the view of "Art-for-a-purpose". The danger inherent in this view is that it is all too easy to begin to appreciate the play of colour, light and form in the mushroom cloud, as it hangs over the stricken city, because the enormities that are taking place below it are no longer possible to grasp. (ix)

Since the end of World War II, the boundary between creative exploration and the tactful avoidance of such "enormities" has become increasingly contested. Some critics, including Clendinnen ("being there" [9]), Steiner (421) and Lang (18), have argued that war, genocide or, more specifically, the Holocaust are best left to the skills of the survivor, the witness or the historian (Langer argues that literature, although unable to evoke the horror of the experience of the Holocaust, does offer an adequate framework for responding to the Holocaust [*Literary Imagination* 12]). Again to quote Steiner, "Fiction falls silent before the enormity of the fact, and before the vivid authority with which that fact can be rendered" (421) and indeed, against a reality so grotesque and unsettling as the Holocaust, we might well expect, even desire, the imagination to founder. Others, including Hoffman (73), Bernstein (*Foregone Conclusions* 45), Horowitz (19), and Lydia Kokkola (23), regard the imaginative portrayal of genocide, set within the boundaries of historical fact, as an essential tool in shifting the Holocaust from its position as an incomprehensible breach of humanity into the realm of believable, and ultimately repeatable, human history.

New techniques of representation were clearly demanded for the literary or artistic representation of the Holocaust, techniques that acknowledged the challenge to the "moral, philosophical, and literary systems" associated with aesthetics (Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust* 92) yet that also allowed for an imaginative response to the Holocaust outside the forms of the memoir, autobiography or historical account. As Langer says, the "universe of dying" that was Auschwitz appeared to call for a new language, one "purified of the taint of normality" in order to effectively convey the extremity of behaviour that underpinned the strategy of genocide (*Admitting the Holocaust* 93). In reducing reader access to the experiences of the victims or survivors of the Holocaust through the restriction of direct voice, the novelists selected for this chapter have chosen to rely instead on the inarguable physicality of these victims, and their very inability to find the right words, to represent the extent to which the Holocaust exceeded the parameters of "normal" human behaviour. Indeed, each of these characters *is* the word that defies articulation. In their very silence they reveal the disjunction between language and meaning that epitomises much Holocaust writing and the hard-to-assimilate facts of the Holocaust itself, so



becoming part of a narrative strategy designed to “express and negotiate crises in memory and credibility and at the same time navigate the intense and complicated emotions evoked by Holocaust testimony” (Horowitz 30).

**“A contaminating stain”: genocide as a crisis in language**

Eva Hoffman, herself the daughter of Auschwitz survivors, identifies genocide as “uniquely unredeemed and dehumanizing, so radically repugnant as to tax the powers of language and of thought” (42). The possibility of such behaviour, she says, “leaves a contaminating stain on all our perceptions, on our very idea of human nature” (43). The incarceration and mass murder of Jews and other “enemies” during World War II suggest a period of inexplicable deviation from the Enlightenment ideal of social rationality in conjunction with individual freedom (while the Holocaust did grow out of an ancient as well as a recent violent past, revelations of a highly structured and organised genocidal course of action undertaken by a western country, by people “very like ourselves” [Clendinnen 18] was at shocking odds with the immediate post-war period of economic prosperity and optimism). Much of this unreason is manifested in the failure of familiar words to encompass the extremities of pain, fear, hunger and disbelief that marked the experience of the concentration camp inmates. As Holocaust survivors such as Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi continued to ask, how can familiar words such as “hunger” or “cold” adequately signify such extremities of deprivation:

Just as our hunger is not that feeling of missing a meal, so our way of being cold has need of a new word. We say “hunger”, we say “tiredness”, “fear”, “pain”, we say “winter” and they are different things. They are free words, created and used by free men who lived in comfort and suffering in their homes. If the Lagers had lasted longer a new, harsh language would have been born; and only this language could express what it means to toil the whole day in the wind. (Levi, *If This is a Man* 129)

As seen in earlier chapters, extremes of barbarity, as well as extremes of deprivation, seem to require an extremity of language that has yet to be devised, that falls silent before the lack of adequate response from a public both inexperienced in such levels of inhumanity and inured to media representations of horror. The Holocaust revealed monumental obstacles to the traditional tools of testimonial narrative: how would readers react to the charade of courteous welcomes and pretty gardens at the entrance into Treblinka? To the random assassinations of Jews? To the biological experiments on the living? To the massacre of infants? Wiesel’s *The Gates of the Forest* (1966) recounts the story of Gregor (formerly Gavriel), a young Jewish man seeking refuge in a cave in the forest. Here he is joined by an unnamed stranger. Giving this man his former name, Gregor spend several days and nights with Gavriel, during which time he learns of the fate of the Jews sent to the concentration camps. After Gavriel gives himself up to the local authorities, Gregor takes refuge at the village

home of his former nurse, Maria, in the guise of a deaf mute. Pre-empting the moment when he will have to convey the truth of Nazi atrocities to a group of Jewish resistance fighters, Gregor himself tries to shut his eyes to the very events that would shock the reader as much as the imagination of the naive Maria:

Gregor's head was bursting with words that floated in the air, dismembered and blind. He wanted to drown them in a sleep that would not come, to strangle them, but they eluded him and mingled with sea and sky. And the heads that were in his head . . . old men's heads with gaping mouths, the heads of slaughtered children, heads without eyes or lips, heads with only an enigmatic smile for a face. Where could he run? What door could he open? (59)

This evocative alignment of unspoken words with the ephemeral spectre of the bodies of Jews murdered in the camps – as elsewhere in his writing, Wiesel here aligns aligning the bodies of dead Jews with the smoke emanating from the concentration camp chimneys – that drifts away manifests itself in the many allusions to silence used by this writer throughout his work. Certainly, as a silent intruder (the villagers do not know that this new, mute arrival is Jewish), Gregor carries the knowledge of the Holocaust, of the old men's heads and heads of slaughtered children, into a community turned in on its own small-town animosities and forbidden love affairs with an apparent disregard for what is happening beyond the borders of the town. As such, Gregor *is* the mushroom cloud, or the silent witness to the mushroom cloud, as it hangs over the stricken city – the simple villagers who are blind to the truth of the silent figure in their midst. As Neher says, Wiesel's work is “[p]loughed, sown and reaped within the Kingdom of Silence” (210), including the “heartrending silence of the children at the hour of their death” (221), and Gregor's reiteration of this silence permeates the wider narrative of the Holocaust in this novel.

Jorge Semprún's *The Long Voyage*, the story of a nameless man's five-day train journey to Buchenwald concentration camp, similarly places the Holocaust within a setting marked by unspeakability. While Wiesel repeatedly draws attention to the silence of his characters, Semprún focuses on the inadequate dialogue of his characters, with only oblique references to the event at the core of his narrative. Such glancings at terror are evident in the portrayal of the Commandant's wife, Ilse Koch, as she admires the skin of a new deportee:

her gaze already cutting out that white, sickly skin along the dotted lines of the tattoo which had caught her attention, her gaze already picturing the handsome effect of those bluish lines, those flowers or sailing ships, those snakes, that seaweed, that long female hair, those pinks of the wind, those sea waves and those sailing vessels deployed like screaming gulls, their handsome effect on the parchment-like skin – having, by some chemical process, acquired an ivory tint – the lampshades covering every lamp in her living room. (148-49)

Such an alignment of aesthetic judgement with murder and maltreatment of the body is likely to alienate or disgust readers, yet equally disturbing is Ilse Koch's quotidian interest in home décor – an interest that could well be shared by many of Semprún's readers. Semprún thus chooses not to ignore one of the most difficult aspects of understanding the Holocaust – that is, the fact that the writer's audience and the perpetrators and victims of the Nazi policy of genocide have more than a little in common. No defining characteristics of Otherness were readily apparent. No distinction can be made on the basis of colour, education or cultural sophistication between those who killed and those who were killed. Any comprehension of the Holocaust, says Clendinnen, thus poses “almost direct threat to our confidence in our own personal integrity” (18). It is this proximity to normalcy that marks the recurring incredulity of Wiesel's protagonist, Gregor, as he grapples with the fate of his Jewish family and comrades within a landscape that carries little evidence of such atrocities. Following the arrest of Gavriel, Gregor is left to a scene that is, in contrast to the inevitable death and maybe torture of his comrade, strangely peaceful:

He heard the twitter of birds of whose presence he had not previously been aware; and it seemed to him quite natural that the same segment of eternity should contain the outcry of the tortured prisoner and the song of the forest. . . . At twilight an infinitely delicate grey light detached itself from the sky. Mildness and peace. A cool breeze blew, farmers came in from the fields, offices emptied, people went home to love, to hate. (61)

In his introduction to his translation of Rolf Hochhuth's 1963 play *The Representative*, explored in more detail further on in this chapter, Robert David MacDonald describes the discomfort of such proximity:

The idea that the fate of a whole people, and perhaps of the world, lay at one time not so far removed from our own in the hands of a bunch of men who in other circumstances might have lived out pathetic, slightly dotty but relatively harmless lives as amiable cranks or shifty perverts in some South Coast resort, is one that we reject as unimaginable – and this makes it all the easier to forget. (ix)

This disconcerting propinquity is also related to time. A two- or three-generational separation from the past may be required before one can view an historical event in its entirety – if we ever really can. Incidents of large scale violence discussed in previous chapters, such as the German colonisation of Namibia, the slave trade of the Americas and the exile of Japanese-Canadians during World War II, were all addressed by their respective authors some years after the event which they describe. The all too-vivid “now-ness” (Hoffman 54) of the

Holocaust denied survivors any historical perspective on the event. From the viewpoint of the children of the survivors, it was as if this knowledge of the trauma of the recent past, was, from their parents' perspective, "too transfixing, too overwhelming, initially, to the ratiocinative capacities, as it induced a kind of trance" (Hoffman 59). Clearly there are certain specifications of distance required in order to regard atrocity on such a scale. Too close, and the view becomes chaotic and turbulent; judgement is overwhelmed – decoding or finding an adequate reaction becomes a near impossible task. Too far and human empathy is lost to the past-ness of mythology or distant history. As Horowitz explains, "The point is not so much to learn the facts directly from the mouths of survivors as it is to break down the cognitive and emotional barriers that keep the past safely in the past for listeners, readers, and viewers" (7).

The resulting reticence operates on many levels: an unwillingness to submit ourselves to the fearful truth of crimes against fellow humans; a fear of negotiating that quagmire of fascination and revulsion which accompanies accounts of extreme behaviour or phenomena; the reluctance by writers to alienate their readers or offend real life victims with explicit accounts of atrocity; and the unwillingness of victims to expose the facts, fearing the pain of re-experience and aware of the bizarre responses – "sympathy coupled with indifference, simultaneous identification with and revulsion toward both victim and victimizer" (Horowitz 104) – to which those without such memories may resort. In *The Long Voyage* Semprún, himself a survivor of Buchenwald, enacts these challenges to both ethics and language, not through complete silence but through a deliberate paucity of attention to the matter at hand – the imminent arrival of the narrator and his fellow boxcar prisoners at the concentration camp. His use of dialogue between these men epitomises the parallel between the horror of the event and the impotence of voice:

"Hey, pal," says the guy from Semur, "you still awake? "

"Yes. "

"I've had about as much as I can take."

Me too. No argument there. My right knee hurts more and more and it's visibly swelling. That is, when I touch it I can feel that it's swelling visibly.

"You have any idea where the camp we're going to is? " the guy from Semur wants to know.

"Not the slightest."

We're there trying to imagine where it can be, what this camp we're going to will be like. (73)

The "we" in the final line of this conversation evokes a wider "we" than the two men in question – how can "we", the readers and writers of Holocaust fiction, align the casual, colloquial intimacy of dialogue to the reality of constrained terror that will end in a blare of lights, music and beatings as the prisoners are forced to jump from the train and run to the gates of the camp? How can "we" the readers ever take that leap into such desperate

unfamiliarity? Terms such as “pal” and “guy”, phrases such as “No argument there”, and even the nonsensical use of the word “visibly” in relation to a purely tactile sensation, suggest this ineptitude of human dialogue in the face of horror, and the ridiculous failure of language to cross the abyss between quotidian human dialogue and the darkness (literal and figurative) that is both the dim train carriage and the concentration camp itself. Semprún’s recourse to stilted conversation may well fulfill the requirement identified by Bernstein for an anti-apocalyptic history conveyed “without flaunting a foreknowledge of the impending catastrophe” (*Foregone Conclusions* 25) – a history that is left to exist without the justification of events yet to occur – yet the casual conversations with “the guy from Semur” with their familiar, insignificant details are memorable only in the fact that they lie on the periphery of what he and the writer know but which remains largely unrepresentable. As James Young asks, “Can we forget what we already know in order to write a past that [is] blind to its later stages?” (280). Semprún not only answers in the negative to this question, he also goes on to negotiate a pact with his readers that accentuates our irredeemable knowingness against the blindness of his characters in an almost slapstick performance of ignorance in the face of extreme danger. In so doing, he keeps our attention on the unseen danger as the minor plot in the boxcar unfolds, thus subscribing to what Rosenfeld describes as “a form of inattentive attention that allows the unorthodox and the seemingly incidental to occupy center stage in the mind long enough to un-do certainties about the way the world works or what one ‘should’ believe” (353).

Shoshana Felman describes a similar use of “minute particular details and . . . apparently trivial specifics” in Claude Lanzmann’s 1985 film *Shoah* (“The Return of the Voice” 218). Such details, she says, “dispel the blinding impact of the event. . . . [It is only by such] small steps – and not by huge strides or big leaps – that the barrier of silence can be in effect displaced, and somewhat lifted” (219). Just as Wiesel in *The Gates of the Forest* continues to draw attention to the minutiae of seasonal change and the comparatively trivial confidences shared with Gregor by the unsuspecting villagers, Semprún maintains a surreal focus on such incidentals as place names and swelling knees through a patter of colloquialisms and inane comments. In this way both writers succeed in undermining the barrier of silence that signifies ineffable horror by focusing not on the overwhelming scale of the event itself but rather on the relatively commonplace details of familiar landscapes and ordinary bodily aches and pains that inch us closer into the shadow of the barely mentioned catastrophic event. The banality of Semprún’s observations and the lyricism of Wiesel’s landscape thus succeed in unnerving the reader by attending to such “normal” details in a manner that delays the imminent collision with the known vacuum in which there is no morality, justice, empathy or reason.

Semprún continues to explore this inability of language to confront – or retain reader attention to – the hellish centre of his character’s experience. Following the emancipation of the concentration camp, he and his fellow surviving prisoners are fed in a local café alongside soldiers from the allied forces:

A very proper evening, actually, very ordinary, everyone playing his role and doing his job. The American officers chewing their chewing gum and talking among themselves, drinking straight out of the bottles of their own whiskey. The English officers all alone, seemingly ill at ease at being on the Continent, in the midst of all that promiscuity. The French officers, surrounded by girls, managing very nicely to make themselves understood by all these girls of various origins. Everyone doing his job. The German headwaiters doing their job as German headwaiters. The girls from various countries doing their jobs as girls from various countries. And we doing our job as survivors of the death camps. A little like fish out of water, admittedly, but quite dignified, our skulls shaved, our striped burlap trousers shoved down into the boots we had retrieved from the S.S. warehouses. Out of place, but impeccably correct, telling our stories to these French officers who were pawing at the girls. Our ridiculous recollections of crematoriums and interminable roll calls in the snow. Then we sat down around a table to have dinner. (17)

Again the quotidian words and phrases – “ordinary”, “nicely”, “fish out of water”, these friendly, familiar, utterly normal terms – appear both abhorrent and farcical in their proximity to shaven skulls and death camps, so recalling Langer’s description of the impossibility of encapsulating the fantastic incongruity of the camps and the image of the frozen bodies of the inmates – “Terrible, ridiculous” (*Admitting the Holocaust* 104).

As Foster says, the traumatic in art involves “not only symbolic disconnection but also failures to signify” (29). Like Levi, Semprún engages with the violence of his subject through a deliberate disengagement from emotiveness or an orderly presentation of explicit detail (Sebald too notes that a “pervasive strategy of understatement that “prohibits both pity and self-pity” is typical “of all the accounts of victims of persecution” [155]). Akin to the odd assortment of objects signalling the unassimilable pain of Safron Foer’s characters, Semprún leaves us with literal signs (whiskey, waiters, burlap trousers), semiotic arbitrariness (a “very proper evening”), and a prevailing sense of the ridiculous born out of the disjunction between the ill-at-ease Englishmen and the ironic dignity of the shaven-skulled “fish out of water”. Art in the 1970s, writes Foster, “faced a tremendous arbitrariness with regard to meaning, and in its response it resorted to the mute presence of an uncoded event” (83). In Semprún’s café it is the embarrassingly unequivocal presence of this uncoded event, as epitomised by the shaven headed, burlapped camp survivors, that renders this “very proper evening” so vastly improper.

These examples of the ineptitude of language to portray pain and atrocity on such a scale help to explain the silence that served as a precursor to such cautious attempts at description. Immediately after World War II, newsreels and the print media focused on the invasion of Germany and the Allies’ might. Anti-semitism was “a more obscure matter, the kind of secret one wraps in a cocoon of silence, or protects as one protects an injury” (Hoffman 25). Apart from personal testimonies and the rare – and controversial – publication of such works as

*The Scourge of the Swastika: A Short History of Nazi War Crimes* by Lord Russell of Liverpool (1954),<sup>9</sup> written attention to the Holocaust was scarce. The post-war years were a period of increasing prosperity and consumerism in the west – the unspoken pact not to “dwell on the past” was regarded as confirmation of one’s faith in the future, and succeeded in keeping much of the Holocaust outside creative discourse. The seeming irrationality and barbarity of the Nazi era were at odds with an age wholly confident in its grasp of modernity; the deprivations of the concentration camps were an obscene and unmentionable obverse of a world of conspicuous plenty. As Poland fell out of western view under Russian martial law, as Eastern Europe as a whole fell under a curtain of political repression and censorship, and as West Germany allied itself with the United States in the Cold War, an era of forgetfulness was quietly ushered in. According to Hoffman, “the atrocious devices of gas chambers and killing camps were an irrelevant atavism belonging to another, more primitive epoch, . . . the Holocaust, the whole wretched, shameful, unspeakable business, went underground – except of course in the families of survivors, where its knowledge, however articulated or unexpressed, continued to percolate through everyone’s psyche and the family systems” (85). For over two decades the Holocaust was largely silenced by what Frank Stern describes as a *cordon sanitaire*, a device used to:

ward off the contents, forms, and structures of individual and collective experiences that have an imprint on historical consciousness. More than being just a complacent barrier this act of keeping painful memories at a harmless distance is one of the most ambiguous legacies of the Third Reich. (213)

Against the determinedly forward-looking culture of post-war Europe, in the absence of any historically-shaped agreement about how to represent or discuss the Holocaust, and despite the emerging focus on confession and counselling, accounts of the Holocaust appeared mainly in the stuttered notes of survivors and the oblique brevity of poets such as Paul Celan. As Levi says in *The Drowned and the Saved*: “The experiences that we survivors of the Nazi Lagers carry within us are extraneous to the new western generation and become ever more extraneous as the years pass” (198). Hoffman explains it thus: “The unspeakable and the unimaginable – those words nowadays so automatically applied to the Shoah – may have initially had to do as much with the literal inadmissibility and inexpressibility of the survivors’ anguish as with the nature of the events themselves” (47). While the value of articulation is now widely accepted, for many survivors “the very idea of a ‘talking cure’ was as foreign as it might be to the villagers of Cambodia or Rwanda, and they would have considered the whole business of baring your soul to a paid stranger simply an added humiliation on top of all the others they had undergone” (Hoffman 51). The act of telling, confirms Laub, can itself be “severely traumatizing”; if the price of

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<sup>9</sup> Based on documentary evidence submitted to the Nuremberg trials (1954), extracts of this book were published by the UK *Daily Express* in 1954 under the heading “The book they tried to ban”.

speaking out is a re-living of the initial event then the result may be not relief “but further retraumatization” (“Bearing Witness” 67). Even now, the popularity of the confessional approach to trauma is driven largely by those generations born after World War II.<sup>10</sup>

In her short story “A Letter to Harvey Milk” (1988), Lesléa Newman presents the more familiar response to terror as expressed by those who lived through the Holocaust. As the elderly Jewish protagonist, Holocaust survivor Harry Weinburg, contemplates the determination of his young New York writing teacher to “preserve our history”, he thinks:

Oy, such stories that I could tell her, shouldn't be preserved by nobody. She tells us she's learning Yiddish. For what, I wonder. . . . Her grandparents won't tell her stories, she says, and she's worried that the Jews her age won't know nothing about the culture, about life in the shtetls. Believe me, life in the shtetl is nothing worth knowing about. Hunger and more hunger. Better off we're here in America, the past is the past. (33)

Only in one sentence in the story does Harry mention, almost in passing, that his mother, father and sister all died in the camps. When expected to record such memories as part of a writing exercise, he withdraws from the class, explaining in a letter to his teacher, “The dead are gone. Better to live for today. What good does remembering do, it doesn't bring back the dead. Let them rest in peace” (46). Yet it is not the peace of “them” – his family members who died in the camps – that Harry is protecting. Rather it is the innocence of the young teacher, the tentative peace of survivors such as himself and the ignorance of the anonymous readers which he is trying to leave intact. Certainly, there are hazards, says Laub, in listening to, or reading about, trauma: “Trauma – and its impact on the hearer – leaves, indeed, no hiding place intact” (“Bearing Witness” 72). Harry Weinburg's protection of his own hidden history, jeopardised by the expectations of the writing teacher, has a corollary in the reticence of many of those who choose to leave their experiences of the concentration camp unsaid.

In *The Gates of the Forest* Gregor acknowledges this dearth of expression when he finds Gavriel in the forest awaiting the imminent arrival of his captors:

[H]e had to cover his mouth with his hand to keep back a cry of fear. Gregor would never have believed that a human face could show so much suffering: Gavriel had no more face. This is the end, Gregor thought, even he admits that the last of the gates is closed. The silence was heavy,

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<sup>10</sup> The last two decades have seen a deluge of survivor testimonies and new historical texts on the Holocaust: according to data from the Library of Congress, 538 such books were published between 1975 and 1985 compared to 1,219 titles published during the following decade (Marks 2002).



weighed down by the passage of time. Silence was everywhere, in the trees, the bushes, and the eyes of the dogs. It even had a smell, the smell of torture, and it spit blood, the odor of a prisoner who has been jeered and beaten and left to die. (42-43)

Against the visceral nature of torture, Gregor is repeatedly overwhelmed by the sheer pointlessness of attempting to articulate fear or suffering on such a scale. Indeed, the jeering and the beating are as much an attack on the prisoners' assumptions of humanity and dignity – assumptions typified by the use of, and faith in, language – as they are an attack on the prisoners' bodies. The initial silence of Auschwitz survivor Jean Améry, writes Sebald, similarly points to a realisation that language “ultimately proves inadequate as a cure for the precarious condition of a man losing faith in the world again daily when, on getting up, he sees his Auschwitz number tattooed on his forearm. . . . The words that Améry set down on paper, and which seem to *us* full of the comfort of lucidity, to him merely outlined his own incurable malady” (166-67). Langer explains it thus:

The spatial and temporal boundaries caging Holocaust fiction require an imaginative leap into a stifling region that often leaves us bereft of intellectual breathing room. Little is ever resolved. Trained by tragedy to meet a fate to be mastered, we greet instead a doom to be borne. Hoping to find stories of character braced by suffering, we exhume tales of men and women pruned by atrocity to their naked and vulnerable selves. (*Art from the Ashes* 236)

As with Harry Weinburg, Vladek in Art Spiegelman's graphic exploration of his parents' experience of the Holocaust, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale I* (1987), cannot understand his son's interest in his wartime experiences: “It would take many books, my life, and no one wants to hear such stories. . . . Better you should spend your time to make drawings that will bring you some money” (12). Eventually, of course, he does give his son, Artie, an account of his experiences (as the subtitle for the book states, *My Father Bleeds History*) leading up to his incarceration at Auschwitz. Yet, while Vladek's account appears open and honest, behind his story is the silence of his wife Anja, Artie's mother, who committed suicide after her internment at Auschwitz. Her narrative remains gagged by Vladek's bouts of forgetfulness, his burning of her journals (despite Anja's expressed hope that her son would one day read her story), even his refusal to talk about her while the tape recorder is running. As the elderly Vladek tells his son, “After Anja died I had to make an order with everything. . . . These papers had too many memories. So I burned them” (159). Anja's experience is thus defined by her absence – her story is the silent story of the many who died during or immediately after the events between 1933 (when the internments began) and 1945 – and it remains inadmissible to her grieving husband (rather than reading her journals himself, he merely “looked in” [159]) as well as to her curious now-adult son.

Can the silence of a witness, asks Young, “be part of the essential historical truth of the events here?” They can, he writes, “if historians come to hear these silences and grasp their role as part of the empirical data they are collecting” (280). Certainly, the silenced characters in *Maus* signify the limits to Vladek’s memory, limits that hold in their very admissibility the core of unrelieved – and un-relived – Holocaust trauma. Such limitations encompass varying degrees of deliberation: Vladek purposefully burns Anja’s papers, some events fall completely out of recollection (or are revisited and revised), and the very structure of the book itself is, as Douglass and Vogler state, a fallible memory of another fallible memory: “What Spiegelman remembers and what he represents in *Maus* is the scene of *his own* memory of his father’s telling of *his* memory, and we can see that this is part of his emphasis on the mediated nature of his knowledge of the Holocaust” (47). While this argument is undermined by Spiegelman’s recurring drawing of a notebook or tape recorder in Artie’s hand – presumably authenticating Vladek’s account – it does reveal the subjectivity of the context of these conversations, especially in regard to Vladek’s exasperation with his family, his ill-health and his barely mentioned sense of guilt. While this may impact on the validity of Vladek’s testimony, it also provides an insight into the impossibility of unearthing a truth devoid of subjectivity, contingency, misapprehension and conscious (as with Newman’s story) or unconscious forgetfulness.

Just as Gregor in *The Gates of the Forest* laments the failure of language to connect with the reality of the Holocaust – “Everything is falling apart; past, future, present, hope, humanity, progress, all these are nothing but words” (120) – so in *The Long Voyage*, Semprún’s character reiterates this inadequacy of language to comment on the Holocaust in any meaningful way:

... as I mechanically answered these asinine questions – were you very hungry? were you cold? were you terribly miserable? – I decided never again to talk about this voyage, never again to allow myself to be placed in the position of having to answer questions about this voyage. I knew, though, that this would not be possible, never to talk about it. But at least a long period of silence, years of silence about this journey, God, that was the only way to survive it. Maybe later, when no one talked about it any more, maybe then I would talk about it. That possibility floated dimly on the horizon of my decision. (105)

In his autobiographical work *Literature or Life* (1997) Semprún explains this reticence further:

I start to doubt the possibility of telling the story. Not that what we lived though is indescribable. It was unbearable, which is something else entirely ... something that doesn’t concern the form of a possible account, but its substance. Not in articulation, but its density. (13)

And later: “Only forgetting could save me” (161).

Yet the longer the silence surrounding the Holocaust prevailed, the more it came to be in itself a succinct representation of the horror that appeared to defy encapsulation, an ongoing but unspoken confrontation with – and evasion of – Nazi terror. The concentration camp, writes Laub, collapses:

both the gaping hole of genocide and the gaping hole of silence. The impossibility of speaking and in fact of listening otherwise than through this silence, otherwise than through “this black hole of knowledge” and of words corresponds to the impossibility of remembering and of forgetting otherwise than through the genocide, otherwise than through the “hole of memory”. (“Bearing Witness” 65)

### **“I’m alive and I’m seeing”: the shame of victimhood**

As we have seen in many literary descriptions of historic acts of terror, public knowledge of gross acts of violence inevitably shames the victims of that violence. The humiliation experienced by the victims, “not for having done anything but for having submitted to degrading treatment” (Hoffman 43), is a recurring theme in these often curt accounts of the Nazi death camps, as is the shame of subjection to domination, pain, terror or the objectivising glance of a man who can sentence death with the preoccupied flick of a pen. Such an experience is encapsulated in the gaze of the Nazi officer Doktor Pannwitz as recorded by Primo Levi as a stare “across the glass window of an aquarium between two beings who live in different worlds” (*If This is a Man* 111) – a stare that pronounced him irrefutably less than a man. Although Levi could not explain this look, he could “isolate it and display it for our attention” (Clendinnen 44), while also recognising himself “as an Ancient Mariner button-holing the wedding guests on their way to the feast, darkening their unshadowed celebrations with his doleful tales: an importunate, isolated revenant from an irrelevant, macabre Elsewhere” (Clendinnen 34).

In the new era of hope following the end of World War II the tales of carnage that accompanied the survivors of the Holocaust on their journey to Israel were met with “uneasy embarrassment or eyebrow-raising skepticism” (Hoffman 83). Even the Yiddish language was rejected in Israel as the language of the Diaspora, evidence of a shameful disempowerment and non-heroic acquiescence to Nazi prosecution that was at odds with the proud nationalism of young Zionists. As Bernstein says, for many Holocaust writers “the entire experience of Diaspora Jewry, and even more so the Shoah, was a source of profound national embarrassment” (*Foregone Conclusions* 56). Efrat Shalom quotes Israeli poet-translator Ilan Sheinfeld, who says the loss of his parents’ language was an effective eradication of his own East European roots:

“On the one hand, I live the Israeli experience that I know so well, and on the other, I don’t know anything about my past as a Jew and as a member of a family of Holocaust survivors. The immigrants shook off the Diaspora because they could not cope with the great pain of the Holocaust. . . . When my grandmother taught me Yiddish in my childhood, my mother was very angry – she did not want her son to know Yiddish. The Ashkenazim [Jews of East and central European extraction] who came here after the Holocaust never spoke of the Diaspora, because the very memory horrified them.” (“Yiddish comeback” 2006)

Yet the experiences of the Holocaust survivors did not need to be spoken to impact on the consciousness of those who were not involved. At least *some* sign of deprivation or torture was evident in the physical presence of the victims of Nazi atrocity. In *The Gates of the Forest* the explanatory body of the Jew is demonised, as dramatically revealed when the townspeople viciously attack the supposedly deaf-mute figure of Gregor when he acts the part of Judas in the town play. In this scene the local villagers, once so conciliatory towards the “disabled” young man, respond to the clearly fabricated character of the archetypal deceiver of Christianity while also giving vent to their anger towards the presumed son of the beautiful but cruel Ileana, the seductive village woman long gone from this tight peasant community.

Just as Brink presents the body of Hanna X in *The Other Side of Silence* as living, albeit repellent proof of the cruelty of the German military regime in Namibia, Semprún also addresses the public response to the evidentiary body in relation to Nazi atrocity. Walking with fellow camp survivors through the small German village that lies within viewing distance of the concentration camp, the central character in *The Long Voyage* is aware of the twitching curtains that shield those reluctant to recognise the truth of the recent past as represented by these walking skeletons. The stain of human atrocity, he realises, contaminates those who witness, as well as those who are hurt by, such violence: “People are peeking out at us from the house. We came here in search of life as it used to be, of life outside. But we brought with us the threat of everything unknown, of a reality which till yesterday was criminal and punishable. The village feigns emptiness around us” (121). Later in the book Semprún’s character confronts the elderly woman whose living room window looks out over the chimneys of the camp: “I go over to the living room windows and see the camp. Framed in one of the windows I see the square chimney of the crematorium. So I look. I wanted to see, and I’m seeing. I’d like to be dead. But I’m seeing, I’m alive and I’m seeing” (154). In his anger at the grey-haired woman, who “throws [photos of] the bodies of her two sons at me for fodder” (155), he acknowledges too his anger at his very ability to see, his ability to breathe, compared to those other potential witnesses – his dead compatriots murdered just beyond this village home.

This scene echoes that in Wiesel's *The Town Beyond the Wall* (1975) as the central character, Michael, recalls the sight of an onlooker staring through a neighbouring window with seeming indifference as Jews are rounded up for transportation to the concentration camp:

A bland face, banal, bored: no passion ruffled it. I watched it for a long time. It was gazing out, reflecting no pity, no pleasure, no shock, not even anger or interest. Impassive, cold, impersonal. The face was indifferent to the spectacle. What? Men are going to die? That's not my fault, is it now? I didn't make the decision. . . .

He, standing behind the curtains, watched. The police beat women and children; he did not stir. It was no concern of his. He was neither victim nor executioner; a spectator, that's what he was. . . .

I felt neither hate nor anger toward him: simply curiosity. I did not understand him. How can anyone remain a spectator indefinitely? How can anyone continue to embrace the woman he loves, to pray to God with fervor if not faith, to dream of a better tomorrow – after having seen *that*? (150)

As Horowitz says, “Most important to Wiesel is the experiential difference between the silences of the victim, the indifferent observer, and the perpetrator. . . . Wiesel redraws the lines of complicity to encompass not only active collaborators with Nazi genocide but also the unresponsive spectator who did not protest” (120). Levi, too, explores this subject, the “shame of the world” as carried by those who:

faced by the crimes of others or their own, turn their backs so as not to see it and not feel touched by it. This is what the majority of Germans did during the twelve Hitlerian years, deluding themselves that not seeing was a way of not knowing, and that not knowing relieved them of their share of complicity or connivance. (“Shame” 85-86)

The traditional silence that surrounded the imaginative exploration of the Holocaust may well have been shaped by the collective guilt or deliberate amnesia of those who stood apart from Nazi crimes and did nothing, evidence of what Langer describes as “the visible failure of good to carry out its historic mission of unmasking and overwhelming evil” (*Admitting the Holocaust* 94). Such statements provoke the question that continues to haunt the pervasive silence at the core of Holocaust writings: did the West conspire to maintain a largely uninterrupted silence in regard to the Holocaust? Did the world look away at the very moment that those in not-too distant Europe, or those in a not-too distant town, were methodically enacting a campaign of genocide? Describing the torture and murder of Jews in Treblinka, Steiner writes, “Precisely at the same hour in which Mehring or Langner were being done to death, the overwhelming plurality of human beings, two miles away on Polish farms, 5,000 miles away in New York, were sleeping or eating or going to a film or making love or

worrying about the dentist. This is where my imagination balks” (181). While the horror of the disparity between such parallel experiences is, of course, an exercise in hindsight, the continuing lack of outrage, commiseration or despair for the two decades after the event is far more terrifying: “The memory of hope cries out in one of the last messages received by the outside world during the rising of the Warsaw ghetto: ‘The world is silent. The world knows (it is inconceivable that it should not) and stays silent. God’s vicar in the Vatican is silent; there is silence in London and Washington; the American Jews are silent. This silence is astonishing and horrifying’” (Steiner 185).

In *The Gates of the Forest* this pervasive silence of accepted unmentionability is aligned with the disjunction between name and identity. As the stranger encounters Gregor in his cave in the forest he defends his declared namelessness: “‘You don’t see how such a thing can happen? And to anyone? In time of war millions of men live under false names; there is a divorce between man and his name. Sometimes the name has had enough and goes away. Is that so hard to imagine?’” (9). In the face of the stranger’s recurring bouts of silence, Gregor, before he adopts the guise of a deaf mute, is accepting – “To each his zone of silence,” he thinks (9) – yet Gavriel’s namelessness can be seen to be part of a deeper religious questioning that pervades Wiesel’s work. As Estess argues, Wiesel’s interrogative approach to fiction is based on pre-Holocaust notions of religion and religious inquiry – in the Bible, Adam’s first question to God is not, Estess remind us, “Who are you?” but “Who am I?” (1976) – and certainly, the ambiguity of identity in *The Gates of the Forest* and other works by Wiesel alludes to the religious irresolution that was so urgently expressed during and after the Holocaust.

In *The Final Solution: A Story of Detection* Michael Chabon tells the story of young Linus (“a mute German jewboy” [26]) who appears as an almost theatrical aside to the Sherlock Holmes-type plot of the main narrative. When Mr Shane, the travelling salesman, is told of Linus’s background, his reaction can be seen to typify the glib post-World War II response of a nation refusing to confront the extent of the horror of the Holocaust, adopting instead the “deliberate amnesia of the guilty and the self-protective amnesia of bystanders” (Clendinnen 56):

Shane nodded, mouth open, eyes blinking slowly, like a golfing man pretending to enjoy for courtesy’s sake an impromptu lecture on cell mitosis or irrational numbers. He might never have heard of Germany or Jews or, for that matter, of vicars or children. The air of deep boredom that settled over his features looked entirely natural to them. . . .

“Nazis, was it?” said Shane. He gave his head a moderate shake. “Rotten business. Tough luck for the Jews, when you come right down to it.” The question of whether or not the boy was going to spit out the bit of soup he had dabbed onto his tongue appeared to interest him far more than had the internment of the Jews. (15-16)

The casualness of Shane's remark disturbs the reader not only because it seems so utterly disconnected to the terror witnessed by the mute boy during his stay in the house of a Nazi official, but also because it reflects the degree to which barbarity is able to be defused through the quotidian commentary of glib social chit-chat, just as Semprún's character finds himself at the café table, a "little like fish out of water" (17). The experiences of Gavriel and Gregor in *The Gates of the Forest* further attest to the lack of empathy accorded the victims or potential victims of Nazi anti-Semitism. When Gavriel knocks on the door of a farmhouse to beg for food he is regarded as "a ghost, a Jewish ghost, and they were terrified" (36). Later the two men overhear soldiers discussing the missing Jews in the forest:

"Where the devil can they be?"

"With these Jews you never know. They're everywhere and nowhere, visible and invisible. If you don't want to see them, they're on every street, in every bank and business office. But if you want to lay your hands on them, they melt into thin air and you can't find them. The devil protects them." (38)

Sherri Szeman's *The Kommandant's Mistress*, the story of a young Jewish girl, Rachel, in a concentration camp attempting to escape death through her silent acceptance of the commandant's sexual attention, reiterates this casual assumption of Jewish subhumanity. Related from the perspective of the commandant, Maximilian von Walther (the book alternates between Rachel's voice and that of von Walther), this brief conversation preceding the execution of a group of Jewish prisoners juxtaposes orchestrated murder with banal details to reveal the lack of value given to the lives of the doomed Jews:

"We're ready, Herr Sturmbahnführer."

"Ready?" I said, looking over the group of prisoners standing in the woods. "They're still dressed."

"You want them to undress, sir?"

"Do you want blood all over the clothes?" I said. "Of course they have to undress. Hurry now, I want to be done by lunch."

"Yes, sir."

He scurried over to the prisoners and began shouting instructions. I pulled out a cigarette. A nasty habit, I know. I was always trying to quit. . . . I blew smoke toward the trees. One of the women started wailing. That made the children cry. The men undressed in silence. If you could call them men. (100)

Walther's regret over smoking compared to his lack of emotion in directing novice guards on how to shoot prisoners without staining reusable clothes or requiring "unnecessary physical contact" (101), exemplifies the disregard he holds for the lives at his disposal and the enduring shame of such disregard that stains the lives of the survivors of the Holocaust. Even for the children of the survivors, says Hoffman, any confrontation with the "known or suspected humiliations the parents had suffered" (68) was a risk that dared not be taken. Faced with the impossible images of parental indignity or disempowerment, she says, children responded with an unspoken sense of confusion, disbelief or outrage against the sufferer.

As readers of literature are we susceptible to those same child-like responses to unpalatable descriptions of atrocity? Semprún opens his account of his experience of the Holocaust, *Literature or Life*, with a description of his reception in the eyes of three officers in British uniform, who gaze in horror at the emasculated figure before them:

They're standing silently a few steps away. They avoid looking at me. One officer's mouth has gone dry, I can tell. The other Britisher has a twitching eyelid. Nerves. As for the Frenchman, he's looking for something in a pocket of his military jacket, which allows him to avert his gaze.

I laugh again – too bad if it's out of place.

"The crematory shut down yesterday," I tell them. . . .

They wince, vaguely nauseated. (10)

The wincing, and the transparent ruse of searching for something in a pocket, is an understandable but, indeed, laughably inappropriate response to a confrontation with an appalling truth, a blatant recognition of how far the facts of the crematoria and the starving figures of the camp prisoners exceeded – wildly, ridiculously – previously held concepts of war. Adopting a more serious tone, Clendinnen, in her argument that the Holocaust should be kept out of the arena of imaginative exploration, describes the sense of shameful trespass that accompanies literature's attention to the death camps. There is, she says, "a decent and natural tendency to drop our glance and to defer to those eyes, as there is to defer to any words that might come from those dry lips. We know as we look that our experience cannot encompass theirs" (25). When witnesses do speak out, "we see they are visibly abashed by the grotesqueness of what they must say. . . . We see that indeed there is no why here: only the abasement and anguish of utter physical and cognitive helplessness" (Hoffman 178).

Such abasement is evident in the description of the orphan survivors of the concentration camps, as described by the young protagonist in Kosinski's *The Painted Bird*: "[T]hey stood against the walls, mostly silent, neither crying nor laughing, staring at some image which they alone could see" (218). In this work of fiction, based partly on the author's own wartime experiences as a Jewish boy trying to hide his identity in a



number of Polish villages, the young protagonist's mark of Otherness is identifiable by his foreign accent and his Jewish (or possibly Gypsy) appearance. As such, he is subjected to brutal and humiliating treatment – an added burden to his constant fear of identification. In every town the devices of brutality employed by the villagers against the young boy are shaming as well as cruel. He is taunted, laughed at, tied up like an animal and strung up like a corpse in a series of surreal events that is framed by meaninglessness just as the boy's life becomes framed by silence. In limning the boy's speechlessness, Kosinski works towards a "poetics of atrocity" (Horowitz 72-73), yet it is a poetics that is deliberately torn from any association with ethics or aesthetics (the litany of cruelty in the book, including the grotesque butchery of the dim-witted Ludmila, is retold in an unembellished, matter-of-fact manner), as is epitomised in the painted bird of the title. With its wings deliberately daubed with gaudy, bright-coloured pigments, this bird is set upon by other birds of its flock and mercilessly pecked to death to the amusement of the fowler, Lekh, and the other villagers. The act is cruel and pointless, and works as a parallel to the irrational persecution of the young boy and some of the other characters in the text. Such acts are also remindful of the irrational attacks by the "Gang" on Gregor as a young child in *The Gates of the Forest*, in which "to beat up a lone Jewish child, to rub his nose in the mud" was a game – "a tradition, a law" – that had gone on for centuries (28). This "law" is re-enacted later in the plot when the villagers assault Gregor in his guise of Judas in the village play – an assault which nearly kills him but which precipitates his declaration of himself as a fully functioning speaking person, and a Jew. In throwing off his disguise he puts his safety at risk but is also able to retrieve, publicly and loudly, his own identity. During this pronouncement, Gregor speaks in an almost Biblical act of revelation that silences, albeit briefly, his audience with its clarity and unequivocalness. Across many fictional works related to the Holocaust, however, the pervading inhumanity that typifies the brutality of the Nazi regime and the degradation of its victims renders the mediating and reasoning role of language redundant. Just as Gregor's accomplice, Yehuda, is murdered by a peasant to a verbal soundtrack of obsequious greetings and words of friendship and support, so in *The Painted Bird* the babble of foreign accents, the inhumane hilarity of the villagers as birds kill, horses die, children are humiliated and women are brutalised, and the ineffective mutterings of Christian "indulgences" all conspire to make language unintelligible, meaningless or potentially lethal.

As explained in the previous chapter, Kosinski's unnamed protagonist loses his voice after being thrown in the sewage pit of a rural village:

Suddenly I realised that something had happened to my voice. I tried to cry out, but my tongue flapped helplessly in my open mouth. I had no voice. I was terrified and, covered with a cold sweat, I refused to believe that this was possible and tried to convince myself that my voice would come back. (140)

While later his voice does return, this initial alignment between loss of voice and the inhuman, death-like sphere of the subterranean is displayed frequently in representations of terror and barbarity, as seen already in Jakob's hiding place in *Fugitive Pieces*, in the gloomy terrain of the subway in *Anthem* and in the death-infested trenches of Barker's *Regeneration*. This feared zone signifies not only the depravity of human cruelty but also, in Kosinski's narrative, the irrevocable impact of such cruelty on victims, witnesses and even bystanders. Even after the boy is reunited with his parents, his ability to speak again is clearly not matched by a renewed capacity for emotional warmth or attachment, so revealing a state of depleted empathy that may well mimic the numbness of the reader after trawling through this long catalogue of barbaric acts. As David Richter says in his essay on this novel, towards the middle of *The Painted Bird* we sense, for the first time perhaps, that "the repulsive peasantry have had their emotional sensitivities blunted by years of pain and suffering just as ours have been by Kosinski's pages. . . . And at this point in our reading the horror returns, mixed this time with bitter shame" (373).

In Levi's writings the proximity to inhumanity binds those who survive to those who die. In attempting to explain his inability to speak for all survivors or camp inmates, on the grounds that he *can* still speak out, he says, "We are those who by their prevarication or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it, or have returned mute" ("Shame" 83-84). Levi refers to the post-war period as an escape from this darkness, as a return from a non-human state to a humanity that is, however, never fully recovered:

Coming out of the darkness one suffered because of the reacquired consciousness of having been diminished. Not by our will, cowardice, or fault, yet nevertheless we have lived for months and years at an animal level: our days had been encumbered from dawn to dusk by hunger, fatigue, cold, and fear, and any space for reflection, reasoning, experiencing emotion was wiped out. ("Shame" 75)

David Patterson, in his discussion of the exile of the word and the necessary restoration of the relationship between word and meaning in Holocaust writing, notes that, "Out of the ashes of the dead, life awakes upon the utterance of a responsive word" (132) and, in many of the texts studied here, out of the ashes of dead life, out of the clouds (in Wiesel's terminology) that emanate from the chimneys of Auschwitz and out of the mud of the ground, there emerges a new, silent figure, one foot still in the dank earth of death and the sub- or repressed consciousness from which it has just come. These new golem-like beings, unlike others who have entered and returned from the afterlife such as Ulysses, Orpheus, and Christ, do not bring back proof of the soul's immortality. Rather they emerge permanently, irretrievably damaged. What they have witnessed in terms of

horrific brutality they have witnessed on and in the earth, not in some spiritual underworld, and their reappearance from the dark and brackish sod, like Heaney's Tollund man, suggests proof of a terrible knowledge, an inverted baptism that leaves them devoid of both innocence and Patterson's "responsive word".

The shame of the victim is further enforced by the insidious phenomenon of survivor guilt. The retrospective autobiography, argues Horowitz, "expresses primarily the survivor's desire for relief from guilt" (27). In *The Gates of the Forest* we see Gregor's initial willingness to take on the blame for the death of his old friend Leib, killed as the result of a failed plan to rescue Gavriel from imprisonment: "I am responsible. He who is not among the victims is with the executioners. This was the meaning of the holocaust" (166). Later he argues, "To live is to betray the dead. We hasten to bury and forget them because we are ashamed; we feel guilty towards them" (172). Similarly, in the writings of Levi, we encounter a painful reiteration of his inadequacy as a recorder of camp life simply because he was one of the exceptional few who did survive:

It is no more than a supposition, indeed the shadow of a suspicion: that each man is his brother Cain, that each one of us (but this time I say "us" in a much vaster, indeed universal sense) has usurped his neighbor's place and lived in his stead. It is a supposition but it gnaws at us; it has nestled deeply like a woodworm; although unseen from the outside, it gnaws and rasps. ("Shame" 81-82)

After all his years of reading, writing and witnessing, Clendinnen writes, "Levi decided that the saved could not speak for the drowned, that they could not be 'true witnesses' precisely because they had survived" (47).

In Chabon's tale Mrs Panicker, the landlady, regards the silent Linus as a "shadow of a boy, stealing through the house, the village, the world" (39). Throughout the book the reality of Linus's past is left unaddressed and obscure, the boy himself slightly inhuman: there is, she thinks, something more "deeply alien" about Linus than his nationality or race could explain (41). In this book Chabon makes only passing reference to the Holocaust (Linus is saved from certain death because his father worked as a code decipherer for the Nazis), focussing instead on the mystery of the missing parrot, Bruno. Indeed, the most telling voice in this book, apart from the wise old Holmesian character who remains unnamed, is the parrot itself. Bruno's unwitting words are believed to contain the cipher keys for the German navy. More interesting, however, and completely overlooked by the untrustworthy Mr Kalb, is the train song that Bruno has learned from Linus, a haunting articulation spoken on behalf of the mute boy about his experiences in the house of a Nazi official watching the trains bound for the death camps: "[T]he endless trains rolling off to the place where the sun came up out of the ground every day, each piece of the train bearing the special claw marks that were the interminable lyrics of the train song" (116-17). The evidence held by the parrot is not the cipher keys, but the reality of this silent progression towards

death, a reality best described by the metaphorical repulsion of the parrot as he gazes on the seemingly mad cruelty of the “bird-eating men”.

Shane typifies those who refuse to acknowledge or even show any interest in the experiences of the victims of the Holocaust. He remains oblivious to Bruno’s quiet recital of Goethe’s *Der Erlkönig* poem, about the death of an ailing child, and it takes little stretch of the imagination to consider that the best-not-discuss-it mentality was as much for the benefit of those who would not or could not participate in international outrage as it was for those victims who may be upset by any reminders of such terror. As Johann Baptist Metz states, “The theological question after Auschwitz is not only ‘Where was God in Auschwitz?’ It is also ‘Where was humanity in Auschwitz?’” (Schuster 17). This lack of response was, of course, perpetuated or at least assisted by the determined secrecy with which Hitler’s regime of genocide was carried out. Many accounts have attested to the view that neither the allied forces nor the local inhabitants of Germany, Poland, Austria, France or Hungary knew what was going on.<sup>11</sup> Certainly, behind rural farmland, behind barbed wire fences, behind the policy of Night and Fog (the Nazi term used to describe the policy of secrecy surrounding the concentration camps) and behind a whole new lexicon of euphemisms, such ignorance cannot be completely discounted, not least because the whole notion of the “Final Solution” seemed so unbelievably epic in scale. In *The Gates of the Forest* Wiesel describes this desperate search for adequate language to convey to the unknowing the truth of the Holocaust, as Leib relays to his band of supporters an account of the murder of Jews as told to him by Gregor:

“I have something to tell you,” Leib began. “I must ask you: no tears and no resignation.”

In a clear, dry voice and clipped, concise sentences he told them of the death of the local Jews, evacuated from the ghetto to a destination no longer unknown. He spoke without emotion as he reported the facts of the situation. . . .

Gregor saw their faces register horror; some hardened, others opened wide to sorrow. Haimi put his hand up to his throat and left it there for a moment while he questioned himself as to the meaning of his gesture; then he gave up and contented himself with buttoning his shirt collar as if to protect himself from the cold. The bearded fellow swung his head from right to left and took on a haggard, hunted air. . . .

When Leib had finished his report there was an unbearable silence, one that bound them together until death. All of them bowed their heads. (131)

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<sup>11</sup> This view remains highly contested. While neither Elie Wiesel nor Primo Levi had heard about the existence of Auschwitz before their arrival at the camp, it was simply impossible, says Larry Ping, “to hide the existence of the great network of concentration camps spreading across Germany and occupied Europe. The existence of the death camps was treated as a state secret, but any German citizen living in a large city would have been aware of the police round-ups and deportations of German Jews to the east for ‘resettlement’” (1997).

As discussed previously, Alexander argues that, for trauma to emerge at the level of the collective, a social or collective crisis must first be accepted into the collectivity's sense of its own identity as a "fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they come from, and where they want to go" (10). This act of bringing traumatic events into social discourse is as necessary as it may be difficult. Certainly, Gregor's observations reveal the initial resistance to this process as disbelief gives way to horror then despair. Similarly, in Semprún's narrative the central character tries repeatedly to convey the reality of the concentration camp to two young nurses who ask to be shown around the recently abandoned death camp. Following the comment by one of the young women that "it really doesn't seem all that bad" (71), he takes them into the crematorium itself, hoping to break this barrier of verbal normalcy and intellectual blindness to reveal atrocity in all its screaming, inarticulate horror:

They've just realized it's not a kitchen, and they suddenly fall silent. I show them the hooks from which the men were hung, for the crematorium chamber also served as a torture chamber. I show them the blackjacks and the clubs, which are still there. I explain to them what they were used for. I show them the lifts which used to take the corpses to the second story, to directly in front of the ovens. We go up to the second story and I show them the ovens. The poor girls are speechless. They follow me, and I show them the row of electric ovens, and the half-charred corpses which are still inside. I hardly speak to them, merely saying: "Here you are, look there". It's essential for them to see, to try and imagine. They say nothing, perhaps they are imagining. (74)

And shortly after:

I turn around and find them gone. They've fled from this spectacle. I must say I sympathize with them, it can't be much fun to arrive in a beautiful car, wearing a beautiful uniform that hugs the thighs, and stumble onto this pile of hardly presentable corpses. (75)

Beyond the dark humour of these "hardly presentable corpses" Semprún draws attention to the disparity between language and reality that typifies much Holocaust literature. In choosing to "hardly speak" to his guests, Semprún's character is aware of the resistance of the Holocaust to socially-acceptable discourse. Words are spoken only to give direction to the eyes – eyes which inevitably look away, or, in Wiesel's narrative, heads that bow in mute observance, when confronted with the irrefutable fact of genocide.

In exploring the failure of testimony to breach what Lyotard describes as the "unknowability" of mass death (qtd. in Ball 251), Karyn Ball argues that, if the referent of the death camp is "unrepresentable" as an

experience, then Lyotard must assume the existence of an ‘audience’ who is able and willing to attest to this limit” (251). Certainly, the vanished nurses in Semprún’s narrative, like the peasants in *The Gates of the Forest* plying Gavriel with bread, butter, cheese and eggs just to free themselves of this ghostly reminder of human barbarity on their doorstep, attest to an audience which, like the reader who may choose to close the book at any moment, defines the boundary between the tolerability and intolerability of certain information.

Later in Semprún’s novel the main character, echoing Marquand’s decision in *Islands of Silence* to keep the truth “out of harm’s way” (98), tries to imagine what it would be like to convey every detail of that long journey out of the world that he knew and into that foreign, seemingly untranslatable reality:

If I were to devote myself to relating all the details and detours of this voyage, I might risk seeing the people around me who had consented to hear me, even if only to be polite, grow weary and bored and then die, sliding softly off their chairs, plunging into death as into the almost stagnant water of my story, or else I might see them slowly going mad, raving mad perhaps, refusing any longer to bear the complacent horror of all the details and detours, the comings and goings of this long voyage of sixteen years ago. (199)

### **“The dirty basement of society”: imagining horror**

If, as Patterson claims, the tradition of the novel is made up of language, and if, as so many writers discussed in this chapter suggest, Auschwitz remains naturally aligned to speechlessness, then the Holocaust does indeed present a disjunction between “the novelist and tradition” (Patterson 10). Patterson insists that the days endured by Jewish or other inmates in the Nazi camps:

are days that haunt and harrow all subsequent days, words and deeds, cutting through the frontiers of language and meaning that might once have divided light from darkness. Terror has undone time and with it that being that once inhabited the heart of the human being, the being of the word. (1)

While Patterson associates the resumption of the word in survivor testimonies with a return to religious faith, the demise of “the being of the word” (1) is also related to the much-quoted warning by Theodor Adorno, that to “write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (*Prisms* 34). Rather than suggesting that there can be no literary expression after the Holocaust, this statement acknowledges the difficulties facing philosophy, theory and literature in response to the Holocaust, not least the fact that the act of writing, removed from the conditions described in the narrative, risks a level of dispassion reminiscent of the seemingly clinical callousness with which the “Final Solution” was enacted. As Neher interprets Adorno’s statement, “there could be no more giving oneself over to the pleasures of poetic artistry or the certainties of abstract knowledge – only a painful, gnawing

suspicion of everything” (257). Yet Adorno himself went on to support the translation of pain into language. Perennial suffering, he wrote:

has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living – especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living (*Negative Dialectics* 362-63).

While many people in the ghettos did manage to write their testimonies despite attempts by the military regime to hide the atrocities from the non-incarcerated public, the proximity to death and violence as experienced by those who survived the camps inspired a silence that revealed – shockingly, radically – the limits of language as a tool of registration. The barbarity in the streets of Europe was quickly recognised as part of a trajectory that led directly to torture and death in the camps. It was this path that appeared to defy speech as it appeared to defy reason. Reminiscent of the candlelit confessions of the damaged women in Morrison’s *Paradise* and the torchlit discoveries of old Palipana in *Anil’s Ghost*, the night-time conversations between Gregor and Gavriel in Wiesel’s *The Gates of the Forest* throw light on that very boundary between what could, under the cover of darkness (and semi-anonymity), be said and what seemed to remain beyond articulation:

[Gregor] wished that the sun would never rise, that darkness would never release the light. This was because Gavriel only talked in the dark. Darkness stimulated him, and he peopled it with images and memories. Gregor never tired of listening. The sadder the stories, the more Gavriel laughed. Sometimes he laughed without saying a word, and Gregor realized that the event was so heavy with horror, experienced or anticipated, that words could really not contain it. (34)

The risk, however, in abandoning certain acts to a “weighty secrecy, dark impressions in a landscape of feeling” (Hoffman 125) is the subsequent aestheticisation of such memory gaps as potential recorders are given an excuse to avoid certain events rather than to negotiate the apparent boundaries: “To conclude, for example, that ‘less says more’ is perhaps to skirt problems of representation and memory reconstruction entirely” (Maclear 235). The survivor’s inability to establish a coherent image of self – and Gregor and Gavriel in Wiesel’s text, Rachel in *The Kommandant’s Mistress*, Semprún’s unnamed character and Chabon’s mute boy all lack a complete and specific identity beyond their wartime experiences – is, as Maclear argues, “still another illustration of the sign under siege” (271). Yet it is this very state of besiegement, as characters try and often fail to evoke the reality of their experience, that defines their experiences. The cost of such an illustration may be a loss of character

specificity and continuity but, as physical manifestations of signs incapable of communicating a coherent representation of their experiences within the camps, these silent characters encapsulate an event that depends on its position within the shadows of collective consciousness in order to delay its inevitable transition into the unexceptional narrative of political and cultural history.

It is this omnipresent yet unnameable form of terror, “the frightening imaginings that fill the gaps, and the intimations of a consummately dark, consummately threatening universe” that is, says Hoffman, so terrifying to children (123). Certainly, the silence maintained, often for decades, by survivors of the Holocaust was an understandable attempt to protect children from history’s grimmest truths” (Kokkola 26) – an attempt similar to that described in Kogawa’s *Obasan* – yet it remained a failed silence, inasmuch as Naomi in *Obasan* and Hoffman herself as a child remained aware of an overwhelming, if inexplicable, terror in the midst of their parents’ lives.

In *If This is a Man*, Levi describes the redundancy of a language that had been mutilated – just as the mouths of Friday in *Foe* and Hanna X in *The Other Side of Silence* were mutilated – to such an extent that they had lost the power to represent truth:

Then for the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man. In a moment, with almost prophetic intuition, the reality was revealed to us: we had reached the bottom. It is not possible to sink lower than this; no human condition is more miserable than this; nor could it conceivably be so. Nothing belongs to us any more; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair; if we speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listen, they will not understand. They will even take away our name: and if we want to keep it, we will have to find ourselves the strength to do so, to manage somehow so that behind the name nothing of us, of us as we were, still remains. (32-33)

Yet language was not missing from the Nazi death camp. Indeed it was everywhere, albeit rich with associations of imminent assault or murder. The infamous words above the entrance to Auschwitz, “*Arbeit macht frei*”, are a blatant example of the dishonesty that tested – and failed – the assumption of a predictable relationship between language and meaning.<sup>12</sup> Terms such as “Final Solution”, “Liquidated”, “Special Treatment”, “Cleansing”, “Elimination” and “Resettlement” hid the Nazi policy of genocide and the actions undertaken in the concentration camps within a deliberately inexact, vaguely clinical vocabulary. It was both a slippage in the

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<sup>12</sup> In *Brundibar* (2003), a traditional tale retold by Maurice Sendak and Tony Kushner, and in Spiegelman’s *Maus* the image of these words above the gates to the camp are left unexplained and unchallenged; they just *are*.



mechanics of language and an “essential fracture in the chain of meaning itself” (Gordon 41) that had an ongoing impact on the traditional role of language:

If the proper terminology enabled the Nazis to “exterminate” the polluting “vermin” and infecting “germs”, if Nazi slogans and speeches facilitated their grisly business, then language itself cannot emerge unscathed. (Horowitz 115)

In *Fugitive Pieces* Anne Michaels provides an evocative description of this abusive manipulation of language to undermine the humanity of both victims and perpetrators:

Nazi policy was beyond racism, it was anti-matter for Jews were not considered human. An old trick of language, used often in the course of history. Jews were never to be referred to as human, but as “figuren”, “stucke” – “dolls”, “wood”, “merchandise”, “rags”. Humans were not being gassed, only “figuren”, so ethics weren’t being violated. No one could be faulted for burning debris, for burning rags and clutter in the dirty basement of society. (165)

Like the garden beds of Treblinka and the theatrical detachment of the actual killing process, such a calm misappropriation of language was just one aspect of the “surreal rationality of the camps” (Clendinnen 143), cloaking the crime of genocide under a layer of absurd gentility through a “deliberate pulping of language” that facilitated the self-protective lie and transformed “a vile act into a wholesome one” (Clendinnen 40). As Wiesel says, “The Nazis poisoned language; they polluted it. They were masters at finding poetic words for the most hideous things” (Schuster 73) or, as von Walther admits as he lies on his hospital bed in *The Kommandant’s Mistress*, “Words cut more cleanly, and leave the victim alive. . . . I hated words. Words can’t be trusted. Even mine” (113).

In his short story “Soul of Wood” Jakov Lind portrays the Holocaust through the absurdist tale of Anton Barth, a young disabled Jew with very limited speech hidden in a mountain cabin by his peasant caretaker, the Austrian collaborator Hermann Wohlbrecht.<sup>13</sup> Wohlbrecht’s account of his employment at the St Veith Insane Asylum is imbued with verbal misunderstandings, wordplays, and the literal assumptions of obvious euphemisms. Phrases such as “special treatment” – “a special treatment to make [the ‘patient’] recover more quickly” (51) – are willfully misused by the perpetrators to disguise the truth of their actions (in this case the murder of Jews and political prisoners held in the asylum), and by the bystanders to pretend ignorance of what

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Stenberg describes the damaged character of Barth as a parody of the famous fictional character of postwar German literature, Oskar Matzerath, the dwarf drummer in *The Tin Drum* by Gunter Grass.

was unfolding. In contrast to Anton's virtual silence, the prattle of Wohlbrecht and the Nazi officials draws attention to the blatantly duplicitous nature of the rhetoric of genocide in what Stenberg describes as a "satire of the hypocrisy of the Austrians and a travesty of bloodthirsty Nazis" (775). "Soul of Wood", Stenberg writes, is "a radically different way of using the Holocaust as literary material. Lind's depiction does not seem to be limited to the catastrophe of the Holocaust; rather it leaves the impression that it is the apocalyptic presentation of a world gone berserk" (775). Certainly, the voice of German officialdom speaks with an outlandish disregard for truth, as seen in this speech given by asylum director Professor Muckenpelz to the "inmates" in response to various "rumours" circulating throughout the institution:

The story has been going around – and believe me, it has no foundation whatsoever – that a disproportionate number of patients at St Veith's are dying a violent death. Gentlemen, please, take my word for it that is an untruth, not to say a lie. What we call special treatment in this institution – is just that. The patient is subjected to a special treatment to make him recover more quickly. The treatment is based on a new drug which I myself have introduced here. In only a few hours' time amazing results are registered. Sometimes, in fact, it takes only a few minutes. (51)

It is this very arbitrary connection between words and meaning – the "treatment" does indeed take "only a few minutes" but it is anything but an actual "treatment", and "recovery" is an inapplicable concept – that Lind parodies, that Anne Michaels rails against and that the central character in *The Long Voyage* struggles so vainly to overcome.

While the acts of torture and murder were undertaken within this arena of verbal deceit, within the bureaucracy of the Nazi regime the orchestration of the "Final Solution" was recorded with all the diligence of a well-functioning civil service. Such records, including transport systems to the camps, construction plans for the crematoria, and the use of the gas Zyklon B, as well as details related to the killings themselves, similarly denied the bizarre nature of the events by cataloguing them within the perfunctory processes of office management systems. Under the Nazi regime, writes Steiner, such a methodical recording of crimes enacted against the Jews was precise and comprehensive:

This is what happened under the Reich. Not silence or evasion, but an immense outpouring of precise, serviceable words. It was one of the peculiar horrors of the Nazi era that all that happened was recorded, catalogued, set down; that words were committed to saying things no human mouth should ever have said and no paper made by man should ever have been inscribed with. (122)

When the systematic cataloguing of such information defies any suggestion of an act less than normal, the ability of that same language to prompt empathy for – or outrage against – the unmerciful assault on the human body is thwarted. The plethora of official language and reportage, a seamless conduit of information that tried to sanitise horror through bureaucratic officialdom, was yet another attack on the voice of the inmates. In *Why I Write* Wiesel describes this near-complete assault on language: “We all knew that we could never, never say what had to be said, that we could never express in words, coherent intelligible words, our experience of madness on an absolute scale. . . . [The language of the concentration camps] negated all other language and took its place (201). This inability to find appropriate speech is evident in *The Long Voyage*, as Semprún describes the transfer of a fellow resistance fighter from a prison cell to certain execution:

“So long, boys,” he says. We don’t say a word, we shake hands with him, we have nothing to say. The Mouse is standing beside the oldest Hortieux brother, he turns his head away. He doesn’t know what to do, he rattles the keys, he looks away. He looks like a decent family-man, his gray-green uniform is frayed, his decent family-man head looks away. There’s nothing one can say to a friend who’s about to die, we shake hands with him, we have nothing to say. (48-49)

The repetition, the brevity of the phrases, the attention to the simple physical action of shaking hands – each word breaks against a backdrop of silence as language fails the prisoners, the doomed freedom fighter, and the writer.

Ultimately, the voice as weapon, as a tool for brutal and uncontrolled officialdom, compromised the association of language with the truthful representation of reality. More specifically, the German language itself, used to build and uphold the programme of genocide, came to be associated with the hatred and brutality exacted by the Nazi regime. In her poem “Daddy”, about her relationship with her father, a German tank driver during World War II, Sylvia Plath describes this sense of a contaminated language:

I never could talk to you.  
The tongue stuck in my jaw.  
  
It stuck in a barb wire snare.  
Ich, ich, ich, ich,  
I could hardly speak.  
I thought every German was you,  
And the language obscene

An engine, an engine  
 Chuffing me off like a Jew.  
 A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen (54-55)

Here the German words are immediately associated with the legacy of war and murder, the very sound of “ich, ich, ich” (Plath’s father was a German-born scientist and sociobiologist) encapsulating her own pain through an onomatopoeic reminder of military orders or gunfire.<sup>14</sup>

Paul Celan, the Romanian-born poet, translator, essayist and lecturer who was imprisoned in a Nazi labour camp for three years during the war (his parents were killed in the Holocaust), continued to write in German throughout his literary career – as he told his biographer, Israel Chalfen, “Only in one’s mother tongue can one express one’s own truth. In a foreign language the poet lies” (qtd. in Felman, “Education and Crisis” 26). For Celan, however, German remained a language framed by the silence of the Holocaust-dead. As Dennis Schmidt says, the language in which Celan wrote was “never far removed from the lacerations of pain and death held in its memory. . . . It is a language that speaks as an open wound” (114). Repeatedly in this poet’s work we find a commentary that purports to be born out of silence. Like the mute characters hiding in caves or arising out of peat, mud, manure or the bloodstained earth, Celan’s words self-consciously allude to the speechlessness from which they appear, as in this poem from *Breathturn* (1995):

Landscape with urnbeings,  
 Conversations  
 From smokemouth to smokemouth.

They eat:  
 The bedlamite’s truffle, a piece  
 Unburied poetry,  
 From tongue and tooth.

A tear rolls back into its eye. (147)

If, as Schmidt says, German remained the language of Celan’s confrontation with death and the reality of the death camps (115), it is a language imbued with the acknowledgement of the possibility of silence, a form of

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<sup>14</sup> This use of the Holocaust as an analogy for a sense of personal loss could well exemplify its seemingly casual misuse as predicted by those critics arguing against literary re-interpretations of the Shoah.

address that speaks to and of those who cannot speak, whose death has infiltrated language itself, as seen in this untitled poem:

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in a grave, where  
we with our  
gas flags are flapping,

here we stand  
in the odor  
of sanctity, yeah.

Burnt  
fumes of Beyond  
leak thick from our pores,

in every other  
tooth-  
cavity awakes  
an undespoilable hymn. (Felstiner, *Selected Poems and Prose* 301).

Yet, as Leonard Olschner explains, while Celan repeatedly alludes to silence in his work, and while he remained “haunted by the Holocaust until his death”, he “wrote against overwhelming silence by conceiving of his texts as ‘messages in bottles’ and insisting that his poems were forms of dialogue” (383).

Like Naomi’s Aunt Emily in *Obasan*, Kokkola argues that silence, as much as language, may be regarded as an act of treachery in its acquiescence to the wishes of the perpetrators. In silence, she says, “we become complicit with the oppressor, we hush up the past. . . . Silence offers future generations an empty book to be filled up with, at best, unreliable details, at worst anti-Semitism” (16). Such a code of shared secrecy imposes the added burden of a warranted suffering, as Laub explains:

Survivors often claim that they experience the feeling of belonging to a “secret order” that is sworn to silence. Because of their “participation” in the Holocaust they have become the “bearers of a secret” (*Geheimnisstraeger*) never to be divulged. The implications of this imaginary complicity and of this conviction of their having been chosen for a secret mission are that they believe, out of

loyalty, that their persecution and execution by the Nazis was actually warranted. This burdensome secret belief in the Nazi propagated “truth” of Jewish subhumanity compels them to maintain silence. As “subhumans”, a position they have accepted and assumed as their identity by virtue of the contamination by the “secret order”, they have no right to speak up or protest. (“An Event Without a Witness” 82)

Such a paralysing sense of complicity overwhelms Gregor in *The Gates of the Forest* as he tries to explain to Leib the fate of Jews dispatched from the ghettos to the concentration camps:

The citizens of Gomorrah went in for vice, not death. Our generation is worse than theirs. It’s the generation of the guilty. We all have a share in the crime, even if we combat it; there’s no escape from the trap. . . . There’s the madness of our generation, complicity between executioners and victims. (129)

Such a sense of responsibility would explain the refusal by Rachel Levi in *The Kommandant’s Mistress* to claim authorship of *The Dead Bodies That Line the Streets*, the collection of poems she writes following her experiences in the concentration camp. Confronted by another camp survivor Rachel vehemently denies her own experience:

“I was there,” she said.

I looked at her in silence. Though she seemed old, I could see now that she was not really an old woman. Her eyes were very tired. The noise of the shoppers in the bookstore suddenly seemed far away, and there was only her voice.

“Oh, not in the same camp as you, but in the camps.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said.

“You don’t have to be ashamed,” she said. “It wasn’t our fault.”

“I wasn’t in any of the camps,” I said. “You’ve made a mistake.”

“No one else could have written this,” she said.

She laid the book on the table.

“Please sign it for me. It would mean so much to me.”

I pushed away *The Dead Bodies That Line the Streets*.

“I won’t sign. I wasn’t there.” (131)

Rachel's resistance to disclosure is as steadfast as the woman's need for validation – of her own as well as Rachel's experience. But to break away from silence, for Rachel as well as for other Holocaust survivors, means to negotiate the pain, the guilt, the apparent inadequacy of language and the hazards of disgust, voyeurism or simple disbelief that such an admission may inspire. It is not too difficult to imagine how the threat of this last response, already seen in the silencing tactics of the rapist, would culminate in the silence of the Holocaust witness or victim. In *Night* (1974), Wiesel's first book about his family's experiences at Auschwitz, Moché the Beadle returns after months of absence to his hometown of Sighet in Transylvania. It is 1942. Moché was able to escape the Nazi guns after being taken for dead in a Jewish massacre in Poland. On his return to Sighet, however:

People refused not only to believe his stories, but even to listen to him.

“He's just trying to make us pity him. What an imagination, he has!” they said. Or even: “Poor fellow. He's gone mad.”

And as for Moché, he wept. (17)

Such determined disbelief anticipates the veil of silence that is ever ready to envelop both writers and victims of the Holocaust, as Horowitz explains:

That this literary activity may prove futile is foreshadowed in the recurrent presence of the survivor whom no one heeds and who finally falls dumb. That meaningful testimony may prove impossible is augured in the many retellings of a Nazi taunt: that, were the Jews to miraculously escape, survive, and tell their tale, no one would listen. (43)

In recent writing much of the aversion to articulating terror has been blamed on a numbing lack of empathy, a form of compassion fatigue resulting from too much information, too many stories of Holocaust atrocities – a phenomenon that begins to appear, writes Hoffman, the moment we start to “accept the unacceptable – this time through too much rather than not enough knowledge – with relative calm. . . . the later genocides of the twentieth century add to a kind of routinization of atrocity and a numbing of our capacities for what might be called a first-order, direct response” (178-79). The more we are confronted with revelations of Nazi genocide, she says, the less effect each new revelation has and the more likely we will respond with “increasingly glib perceptions and representations” (171) – a response typified by Shane in Chabon's *The Final Solution: A Story of Detection*. Yet, alongside the disturbing lack of empathy that challenges the writer of Holocaust fiction, there exists too the risk of over-subscribing to grief – of what Bernstein describes as an “almost clinically excessive identification with the suffering of others” (*Foregone Conclusions* 54). Hoffman too

warns against the “dragon of excessive empathy” (97) as Holocaust survivors, yesterday’s untouchables, become “Brahmins of the trauma elites” (172). Such close identification with another’s pain either absorbs the abnormality of the Holocaust into the normal realm of articulated pain and shared angst or risks what Bernstein describes as a horrifying fascination with evil and “the sadomasochistic identification that haunts literature on the Shoah” (*Foregone Conclusions* 58).

### **“We had a story to tell”: writing the Holocaust**

Despite the potential pitfalls of direct descriptions of the Holocaust experience, the silence that punctuates the account of the victim or witness rarely overwhelms his or her voice completely. Hoffman describes the speechlessness that marked but never obliterated the stories of her parents’ incarceration at Auschwitz:

There was a deeply internalized duty not to let diffusion, or forgetfulness, or imaginative transformation dilute the condensed communications. . . . To make a sequential narrative of what happened would have been to make indecently rational what had been obscenely irrational. It would have been to normalize through familiar form an utterly aberrant content. One was not to make a nice story out of loathsome cruelty or piercing, causeless hurt. (15)

Survivors, commentators, critics and writers tend to agree that the events as experienced by Semprún and French writer and Auschwitz survivor Charlotte Delbo have been successfully conveyed without the explicit narrative strategies of traditional “nice stories”. Certainly, the tragic form was inadequate for depicting Holocaust atrocity. According to Langer, efforts to identify the anonymous Holocaust victim with the fate of the tragic figure can lead only to confusion: “The dignity of one tells us nothing about the indignity of the other” (*Preempting the Holocaust* xvi-xvii). In *Art from the Ashes* he elaborates further:

Writers know the limitations of their art, when the issue is mass murder. The evil they need to portray is so unlike Satan’s, the suffering so remote from Job’s, that the very categories inspiring their literary ancestors prove useless to them. No device can conceal the horror of the crime, which even when unnamed rumbles beneath the text until it explodes in the reader’s brain despite the author’s stylized efforts to control its disorder. (238)

Genocide leaves no space for traditional notions of literary heroism, imbued as they are with the idealised self-sacrifice of battle and the principled struggle against a foreign aggressor. Certainly, following the Holocaust, the explanatory voice, the expounding tone associated with ideals of valour and righteousness, seemed suddenly, irreparably, inadequate. As Steiner says, when considering that “a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening,



that he can play Bach or Schubert, and go to his day's work at Auschwitz in the morning", the "house of classic humanism, the dream of reason which animated western society" was brutally undermined (15). Ekkehard Schuster elaborates:

Whatever can we say looking at Auschwitz? Everything we say is false; whether we say yes or no, it is false. Sometimes all we can do is to weep or to pray, to close our eyes in silent prayer. Any commentary, any interpretation, and especially any explanation, is doomed in advance to fail. Jews and Christians have tried to create a theology from Auschwitz, the way that everything of late gets turned into theology. Others have sketched out a psychology or psychiatry of Auschwitz, even a literature of Auschwitz. They all founder. There can be no novels about Auschwitz. (75-76)

Schuster, of course, has been proved wrong. The voice that incorporates silence as a meaningful and apt expression of terror, the voice that exists as evidence of the survivability of the human spirit amidst great suffering, has responded successfully to this need for a new literary form capable of evoking the trauma of the Holocaust. Just as Siegfried Sassoon in Barker's *Regeneration* describes the necessity of "blocking out the killing side, cutting it off" to cope with his battlefield duties (231), so Frederick J. Hoffman explains survival as dependent on "either the wisdom of detachment or the schizoid's retreat before the total victory of environment over self" (279). Both retreat and detachment are evident in the silences enlisted by Wiesel, Semprún, Szeman, Michaels and Chabon, yet, thanks to these excavations of the Holocaust, the experiences of the victims or survivors do not remain unheard.

The earliest literary response to the widespread acceptance of the difficulty in writing the Holocaust was at least two decades of what Lang calls "negative rhetoric" or, more technically, the figure of speech called the *praeteritio*, in which a speaker announces he will not speak about something when the whole purpose of the denial is to do just that. Steiner, Adorno and Celan all spent many words describing the indescribability of the Holocaust; such variations on the indescribable, the unthinkable, the unimaginable and the incredible became, says Lang, "embedded in yards of words which attempt to overcome the inadequacy of language in representing moral enormity at the same time that they assert it" ("Holocaust Genres" 18). The mute character is, perhaps, the closest we get to a physical embodiment of the *praeteritio*, a self-conscious personification of "not mentioning the war" that gains entry, against all predictions, to the imaginative arena. In Wiesel's narratives the mute figure tends to choose not to talk<sup>15</sup> and, by so doing, invites the reader to recognise what cannot be spoken – what, as

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<sup>15</sup> An exception is Moche in *The Gates of the Forest* – after he refuses to speak out against the massacre of his fellow people his tongue is cut out: "He took with him his silence, his secret, his shadow" (48).

Horowitz says, must remain unuttered (119) – while at the same time maintaining the physical presence of the unspeaking figure at the centre of the novel.

In *The Gates of the Forest*, *The Painted Bird* and *Fugitive Pieces* such speechlessness is a pragmatic attempt to hide the protagonist's identity – in all these novels any utterance by the character in question would risk betraying their Jewishness. For the reader, however, it also acts as a physical reminder of the challenge inherent in registering extreme pain or violence. In *The Gates of the Forest* Gregor is asked to retell the events leading to Leib's arrest over and over and over again in a series of painful attempts to attach meaning to this fatal comedy of errors (this scene has a parallel with the experience of Oskar in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* as he listens to his father's last telephone message and watches the film footage of the two planes flying into the Twin Towers over and over again in an ongoing act of non-connection). As Horowitz says, each successive retelling by Gregor "widens the gap between himself and his listeners, until he doubts the veracity of his own story" (145).

Reiterating Adorno's dictum that suffering remains foreign to understanding,<sup>16</sup> Michael Bernard-Donels and Richard Glejzer observe in relation to the recent boom in Holocaust writing that, "it is unclear to what extent those representations – and the academic industry that has grown up around them – provide a knowledge of the Shoah, and to what extent they provide (or perhaps better, present) something other than knowledge, something akin to a flash of horror that precedes and disturbs our ability to know" (3). The insistence on the re-imagining of trauma in order to emphasise the disjunction between an event and the emotional response of the listener or witness has long been the subject of much contemporary art. Andy Warhol used serial production and reproduction in his lurid death and destruction series. In repeated images of a real car crash the artist acts as a shocked automaton, repeating the scene over and over again in a deliberate experiment to eliminate meaning and remove any risk of emotional pain. Such repetition, as seen in Gregor's encounter with determined disbelief as he explains Leib's arrest over and over again, is "both a draining of significance and a defending against affect" (Foster 131):

Clearly this is one function of repetition . . . to repeat a traumatic event (in actions, in dreams, in images) in order to integrate it into a psychic economy, a symbolic order. But the Warhol repetitions are not restorative in this way; they are not about a mastery of trauma. More than a patient release from the object in mourning, they suggest an obsessive fixation on the object in melancholy. (Foster 131-32)

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<sup>16</sup> "Suffering conceptualized remains mute and inconsequential, as is obvious in post-Hitler Germany" (*Aesthetic Theory* 18).

Similarly the repetition of Leib's fate, or the repeated images of the attack on the Twin Towers, never quite master a break from this staring fixation. In both instances the facts are true, they are believed, and certainly in *The Gates of the Forest* the retelling of Leib's arrest adds to a sense of enormity as the "misunderstanding of which one man was the victim" (166) grows in magnitude to encompass the murdered Jews, the loss of Gavriel and the friendship of the partisans, but repeated tellings nevertheless continue to fail to inspire a deeper response of emotional distress or to render one single truth that adequately responds to the confusion of those left behind.

As with many of these writers, Wiesel's insistence on the difficulty in employing language to depict events of extreme atrocity does not contradict the need to keep trying. Wiesel himself, after a self-imposed ten-year vow of silence in relation to his wartime experiences, has written over forty novels, plays, short stories, lectures, and philosophical texts, many of which are concerned with the Holocaust. As Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig write, the question which guides Wiesel's work is this: "What happens when the witnesses are no longer able to pass on their message, and their words pass unheeded?" (62), and certainly, it is the reality of this prediction, as concentration camp survivors began to enter old age, that may well be responsible for the progressive shift from the scarcity of written material immediately after World War II to the negative rhetoric as described by Lang to what can best be described as the "positive rhetoric" inherent in the fragmentary notes, diary entries and memoirs that give increasing voice to first hand accounts of the Holocaust (Gordon 36).

Hoffman describes the attempts by her parents to describe their experiences of the Nazi concentration camps:

Many others who grew up in households like mine remember the torn, incoherent character of those first communications about the Holocaust, the speech broken under the pressure of pain. . . . I suppose the inassimilable character of the experiences they referred to was expressed – and passed on – through this form. For it was precisely the indigestibility of those utterances, their fearful weight of densely packed feeling, as much as any specific content, that I took in as a child. The fragmentary phrases lodged themselves in my mind like shards, like the deadly needles I remember from certain fairy tales which pricked our flesh and could never be extracted again. (11)

This transmission of traumatic memory, even through silence, appears in Hoffman's experience as both inevitable and unavoidable. Indeed, Hoffman describes the Holocaust as a foundation myth, akin to Bernstein's culturally defining narrative. As a child, she says, the Holocaust was a "supercondensed pellet of primal information – the kind from which everything else grows, or explodes, or follows" (6). It was, she says, a deeply internalised but strangely unknown past that marked those who had Holocaust memories apart from those who did not. This sense of the original fable and "world-shaping mythos" (33) was central to her family's being, yet strangely dreamlike, almost fairytale-like. Without being translated into story it remained as a loose compilation

of partly conveyed testimonies and unexamined sensations. While those untouched by the experience of the Holocaust postponed a collective confrontation with their past, for those who had experienced the camps:

it was a chaos of emotion that emerged from their words rather than any coherent narration. . . . The memories – no, not memories but emanations – of wartime experiences kept erupting in flashes of imagery; in abrupt, fragmented phrases; in repetitious, broken refrains. They kept manifesting themselves with a frightening immediacy in that most private and potent of family languages – the language of the body. (9)

The irrepressible memories of the Holocaust thus emerged as nightmares, sighs, tears, illnesses – a muffled, coded language incorporating “humble, homely, disconnected units of narration, the most dread-inducing of family stories, . . . a universe of absolute forces and absolute unreason, a world in which ultimate things happened without cause or motive” (Hoffman 12).

For Delbo, however, the end of the war precipitated a new opportunity to speak out: “Freedom had been won. Our dead, our millions of dead, our suffering, our humiliation would be inscribed in history. We were coming back. We had a story to tell” (119). To speak out, argue Douglass and Vogler, represented a move from a state of helpless victimhood “to a mode of action and even potential self-renewal” (41). Yet there is too an historical explanation for the more recent willingness of victims to speak out about their experiences. Francesca Panozza explains that, while the testimonies of the 1940s and ’50s were largely ignored, the trial of Adolf Eichmann, held in Jerusalem in April 1961, signalled “a turning point and a crucial event for the emergence of the memory of the Shoah. With this trial . . . the memory of genocide becomes a founding element in the Jewish identity” (2004). In 1964 the world premiere of *The Representative* (also known as *The Deputy*) by German playwright Rolf Hochhuth opened in Vienna to a storm of controversy. The play, set partly in Auschwitz, explores the lack of reaction by the Catholic Church toward the Nazi policy of genocide occurring on the Church’s very doorstep (the Vatican had signed a concordat with the Reich in 1933 and maintained a largely unprotesting presence in Berlin throughout the Holocaust). While this known lack of reaction did shock audiences when presented before them in such unequivocal terms, the initial controversy may also have been related to the relaxed references by the play’s characters to various gassing processes (akin to Lind’s sardonic euphemisms and Semprún’s banal conversations in the face of imminent death), the casual indecisiveness by some of the characters over whether to speak out or not, and the alignment of Hitler’s murderous regime with beauty and sex, as seen in the Nazi doctor’s description of Hitler’s desire for the swift annihilation of life:

He was excited by the animal, the beautiful beast of prey, because the discoverer of this glorious monster wrote in a German so high-sounding, so princely, and so arrogant, as if he dipped his pen in champagne.

(*without pausing*)

You can have champagne, here, and girls as well. This afternoon, when that family you came with is cooking in the crematorium, I shall be somewhat heated up myself between the legs of a nineteen-year-old. (235)

What is a dramatist to do, asks the translator of this work, Robert Macdonald, with material that “has made the statuesque horrors of the Jacobean drama both more real and more ridiculous, but which, after a lapse of barely twenty years, has been politely rejected to become the stuff of vicarious erotic fantasy?” (x). His own reply, in telling contrast to the silence elected by the Catholic Church, is simply to “write”: every event, he says, must be reinterpreted by each generation, and there does appear to be a sense of near urgency in some of the more recent attempts to give voice, albeit with silence at its core, to the Holocaust. For Semprún’s character in *The Long Voyage* such a time arrives when it is right to tell his story: “[N]ow, after all these long years of willful oblivion, not only am I able to tell this story, I feel compelled to tell it. I have to speak out in the name of things that have happened, not in my own name. The story of the Jewish children in the name of the Jewish children” (163). No longer a victim, this nameless character now assumes the role of witness and begins his story.

As we have seen, the delivery of such stories is frequently undertaken in a form that reiterates the chaos, the unpredictability, the haphazard treatment of life itself as experienced by those who spent time in the camps. Referring to US fictions, and particularly to fictions of the Vietnam War, Walter Hölbling notes how many of the literary works to first exhibit postmodern qualities “deal with war or war-like situations” (194) and certainly a “fragmented, nonsequential mode of storytelling” characterises many Holocaust fictions (Kandiyoti 315) as writers seek to recreate, rather than describe, the chaoticness of the *univers concentrationnaire*. In *The Kommandant’s Mistress* Szeman’s unorthodox, almost cinematic technique of sliding across time and perspective evokes not only what Karin Doerr describes as the elasticity of memory, connecting “pieces of interrupted dialogue and segments of internal monologue” (2005), but also the nightmarish quality of a world going about its business in a state of seeming madness.

In *Fugitive Pieces* Michaels uses an evasive, highly metaphorical and fragmented form of narration in her account of dislocation, loss, exile and memory resulting from the events of the Holocaust, as seen in this description of the dreams that return to Jakob as he lies in his new home on Zakynthos:

They waited until I was asleep, then roused themselves, exhausted as swimmers, grey between the empty trees. Their hair in tufts, open sores where ears used to be, grubs twisting from their chests.

The grotesque remains of incomplete lives, the embodied complexity of desire eternally denied.  
(24)

Such a form, says Méira Cook, epitomises the fragmentation and memory of the testimony genre:

in which the attempt at narrative is overwhelmed by events that refuse to settle into coherence, understanding, or knowledge. . . . In her arrangement of memory and history as necessarily fragmented and in her use of the poetic voice to articulate the vicissitudes of lived experience, Michaels' novel is, in many ways, a response to Adorno's implicit challenge: if it is no longer possible to write after Auschwitz is the only alternative to remain silent? (12-13)

Michaels's "memoir" of Jakob Beer, says Cook, is an attempt to articulate an experience that "annihilates the very possibility of articulation" (13). Michaels's response to the challenge of representation, she says, is to use a narrative encoded in imagery and metaphor "on the understanding that such writing is constituted by the very incomprehensibility of its occurrence" (13). Such a lush and lyrical discourse is clearly at odds with the events Michaels is narrating, yet as such it succeeds not only in heightening reader discomfort (the same poetic voice used to describe familial love is also used to depict Nazi brutality) but also in providing "a way of thinking about metaphor and metonymy as figurative devices that alternately reveal and conceal the materiality of the event" (16).<sup>17</sup> Michaels's "compulsive metaphorization", says Cook, is a way of signifying the extent to which her subject tests literary encapsulation:

The traumatic narrative presents itself as an event in excess of our frame of reference, an impossible witnessing since the speaking subject is required to testify to a truth that necessarily escapes him/her insofar as it is a partial truth that is at once engendered and dispersed by the act of telling. . . . The traumatic event is related implicitly, since to narrate the event explicitly would be unbearable, would, in effect, replicate the catastrophe it seeks to domesticate through language. (24)

Where Michaels adopts an intense poeticisation of her subject and Wiesel incorporates an almost smothering atmosphere of silence (aligned with the silence of the smoke of the incinerated bodies of concentration camp victims), Semprún enlists the use of dialogue that is not only casual but also stilted, discontinuous and understated in stark contrast to the overwhelming incomprehensibility of the nature of the

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<sup>17</sup> Stephen Henighan takes issue with such lyrical metaphorisation. Michaels' evocation of the Holocaust, he writes, grows "disquietingly lush" (147) and, by dismembering the world into images, "the novel blocks the reader's ability to imagine the movements of history, including . . . the ghastly crimes of the Nazis" (149).

train's destination (Buchenwald concentration camp) and the barely vocalised fear of one hundred men jammed into a boxcar. As the train passes through the scenic Moselle Valley the central character wonders if he should talk only of this calm, pretty scene:

so as not to upset the order of the story. But I'm the one writing this story, I'll do as I like. I could have refrained from mentioning the guy from Semur. He was with me on this voyage, he died from it, that's a story which, actually, is nobody's concern. But I chose to talk about it. . . . I made up my mind to talk about him, it's nobody's concern, nobody's but mine. It's between the guy from Semur and me. (22)

While alluding to the traditional "order of the story" he quickly breaks up the narrative, justifying his statements, repudiating the literary norms that he is using, back-tracking, repeating, addressing silence in every sentence in a self-conscious guardedness that reveals a general discomfort "with established patterns of rhetoric and broad literary structures" (Horowitz 43).

Such fragmentation, incorporating the same "tactile quality" that "hits the spectator like a bullet" (Foster 224) that distinguished the dadaist art movement and that is still observable in cinematography today, is used to recall the voice of the witness responding to what Felman describes as "a crisis of truth" (6): when the discourse of testimony is brought to the fore of the contemporary cultural narrative (6). Although I would argue that the trope of testimony in regards to the Holocaust is valued not only because of its assumed authenticity but also because the narratological tradition struggles to encompass such experiences, the description of memory through testimony as described by Felman could well apply to any of the novels discussed in this chapter:

As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrence that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge not assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference. (5)

In adopting the unsettled, fragmented nature of testimony, fiction writers allude to such boundaries of reference, so signifying those experiences that appear to defy full assimilation while also acknowledging their own limitations as recorders of particular events to which they may not have been witness, let alone victim.

### **"The hydra heads of atrocity": the figure of fiction**

"Since words can never equate with action so much as attempt to correspond, mirror, mime it," says James Knibb, "any attempt to depict war in writing must, in part at least, show how the tradition of war writing (the

language of war) tried – and inevitably failed – to meet the existential reality of war” (11). Many critics, as we have seen, support the view that historical tracts or witness accounts must suffice in any attempt to portray the “existential reality of war”. Certainly, most writers of Holocaust fiction or non-fiction continue to display an allegiance to factual subject matter: “The Holocaust-as-theme is perhaps unique in our transgressive age in maintaining the integrity of its own boundaries and hence of the limitations it exercises on ‘artistic’ representations” (Leak et al 10). Even the truncated idiom of some fictional works reveals a preference for documentary-style reportage in contrast to the more literary tools of analogy and abstraction. As Horowitz says, “there is a high degree of discomfort with the idea of an aesthetic project built upon actual atrocity, as well as a proprietary sense of what belongs properly to the domain of historians” (8).

Yet the presumed boundary that protects non-fiction from fiction has proven to be more breachable than these critics suggest. Survivor testimonies have been found to be highly personal, often stylized, fragmented and partial accounts of events. Indeed, “the absolute authority given to first-person testimony,” says Bernstein, is one of the most pervasive myths of our era (*Foregone Conclusions* 17). As Kokkola says, historical narrative is as prone as any other form of literature to be manipulated by “voice, society, linguistic convention, fact selection” (54). Even Lang agrees that personal testimony is a narrative based on the subject position of the memoirist. In considering the inadequacy of testimony, or historical tracts based on testimony, in conveying the facts of an event, Bernard-Donals and Glejzer ask whether it is better to engage in an ethics of trauma, “in which what is transmitted is something other than knowledge, a radical sense of the event’s horror and unreason rather than a reasonable map of the event as history” (12-13). Memory, writing and history, they argue, begin at the point of forgetfulness, thus any representation is an imprint, a record of an event’s effect or a replacement of that event using the same generic conventions as those employed by the writer of fiction: “The distance between what has been witnessed and what can be committed to testimony – what was seen and what can be said – is often wide and always palpable: not only in the witness’s statements but in the shrugged shoulders, the winces, the tears, and the silences that punctuate written and oral testimonies” (7).

Delbo describes her own fractured memories of her experience at Auschwitz. On the one hand there are the acts and events recorded by the intellectual mind, external memory “connected with thinking processes” (3). On the other, there are the more painful sensations of “deep memory” (akin to Paul D’s sense of the “deep memory” of black Americans in Morrison’s *Beloved*) that preserve emotions and physical imprints. This she calls the “memory of the senses” (3):

Auschwitz is there, unalterable, precise, but enveloped in the skin of memory, an impermeable skin that isolates itself from my present self. Unlike the snake’s skin, the skin of memory does not renew itself. Oh, it may harden further . . . alas, I often fear lest it grow thin, crack, and the camp get hold of me again. Thinking about it makes me tremble with apprehension. (2)



The reality of the Holocaust, Delbo suggests, is more than that reported through testimony or memoir – it is a deeper, more sense-based narrative that survives the incursion of historical recording, awaiting perhaps the more incisive probing of creative interpretation.

One of the risks of a purely historical approach to the Holocaust is the tendency to situate it in a wider societal picture that, with the luxury of hindsight, suggests what Bernstein describes as a “wrenching inevitability” that is itself a product of conjecture (*Foregone Conclusions* 9). Bernstein explains how historians “try to make sense of a historical disaster by interpreting it, according to the strictest teleological model, as the climax of a bitter trajectory whose inevitable outcome it must be” (*Foregone Conclusions* 9). The temptation to see the Shoah as the “simultaneously inconceivable and yet foreordained culmination of the entire brutal history of European anti-Semitism” (10) is, he argues, a dangerous manipulation of historical fact that can be used to justify present social or political actions.

The Holocaust, says Lang, “*is* speakable, *has* been spoken, *will be* spoken . . . and most of all, *ought* to be” (“Holocaust Genres” 18). But in recognising the impetus towards silence, and the ongoing subjectivism of testimonial or historical texts, *how* should it be spoken? The challenge, says Hoffman, is to find forms “through which to confront the hydra heads of atrocity, to give artistic expression to images and stories from which one wants to, needs to, avert one’s mind and eyes” (23). Although Bernstein acknowledges that fiction’s element of aesthetic pleasure is contradictory to the reality of genocide,<sup>18</sup> and that the figuration of events by non-witnesses can be seen to debase those who did experience the Holocaust, he concludes that so deeply ingrained is “our need to ‘make sense’ of even the most ‘senseless’ calamities”, and so powerful is the urge to “enfold even the harshest of experiences within a recognizable pattern, that we have no choice but to draw upon the narrative conventions we have learned in other less grievous cases or be shunned into a permanent silence” (95). I would argue that new narrative conventions have been devised to address trauma since writers have sought to address the Holocaust in their literary works, but certainly Hoffman echoes Bernstein’s calls for a creative response to the articulation of the Holocaust:

Just as for some survivors only full remembering could bring about some catharsis, so for the second generation, only a full imaginative confrontation with the past – however uncanny, however unknown – can bring the haunting to an end. (73)

As we approach a time when the memory of the Holocaust “will no longer be embodied in a real human presence” (Leak et al 3), there is perhaps, a duty to recall the Holocaust within the more timeless trope of fiction

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<sup>18</sup> A contradiction noted in the vicarious and seemingly inappropriate sexuality in William Styron’s *Sophie’s Choice* (1979).

or poetry. Robert Gordon suggests that acts such as storytelling, anecdote and dialogue “are the key means to preserving a sense of subjectivity. . . . fiction, fantasy, or at least something more than record, serves better to recall and communicate than bare fact” (42) and certainly in the texts discussed in this chapter, an imaginative interpretation, enlisting the trope of silence, has proven to be a legitimate means of portraying the Holocaust outside the genres of history or testimony. Within such interpretations, the mute character has a pivotal role in negotiating the careful depiction of this event without hauling the reader into an unreasoned maelstrom: “the survivor who can find no words may be more eloquently present than a verbose Holocaust scholar. Silence does not signal absence; indeed, silence may signal a presentness that words lack” (Kokkola 24). Vogler too acknowledges the effective representation of the “unrepresentable” through silence. Such an absence, he argues, is not rhetorical but substantive – to be touched by such an “absence or silence is to experience a hole in the fabric of language, a hole and not a symbol of a hole, a hole that is the effect of extreme experience, even if not the experience itself” (191).

As with the voiceless figures studied in previous chapters, the silent characters in these works personify an experience that, in this time and place, must remain largely unsaid. Their bodies, however, remind us that the truth cannot be erased. Their chaotic presence avoids the assumption of the orderly development of a world progressing towards a superior and truly enlightened sense of humanity, while their silence undercuts any bid to draw sense out of acts that still remain glaringly senseless or to ignore such acts altogether. “The trope of muteness, embodied in silent and unintelligible characters, underscores the failure of language to mediate a harsh reality,” writes Horowitz (156), yet at the same time the very presence of these “silent and unintelligible characters” succeeds in conveying a reality that language is not yet trusted to do. While Gregor in *The Gates of the Forest* lives in the guise of a deaf mute, the knowledge he holds of the Holocaust has its echo in the many small betrayals, lies, deceits and infidelities confided in him by his new neighbours. Their belief that the dumb Gregor will be a final repository for their secrets – akin to the figure of the sineater in Booth’s *Islands of Silence* – is paralleled by the silent witness to the Holocaust as seen in Chabon’s *The Final Solution: a Story of Detection* and Kosinski’s *The Painted Bird*. These unspeaking characters are inadequate as concise recorders of historical truth yet in their physical presence and curtailed speech they encapsulate the magnitude of their whispered or unspoken stories.

In its very restriction of character, the silence at the core of these books acts as a constant reminder of the silence of the many that died. Neher claims that the presence of the dead in Wiesel’s work “is enough in itself to create an atmosphere of silence so intense that not a second can be empty of silence in these works unassailably inhabited by the six million dead” (212). The mute survivor is thus the unspoken word, refusing to make sense out of non-sense, yet refusing too to retreat, along with those already silenced through death, from our imaginative understanding of terror. The tears of the reticent Moshe the Mute in *The Gates of the Forest* articulate this ability of silence to speak on behalf of a people, a whole silenced tribe: “Surely no one had ever

wept like this before; his tears were not those of one man but of an entire people; in their source were drowned the beginning and the end of time” (44), the voice of the witness thus conjuring up the “the countless others who are also absent” (Vogler 183-84).

One of the most compelling arguments against the use of fiction to describe events such as the Holocaust is that it makes possible the reader’s entry into the mind of the aggressor, and in written representations of the Holocaust there appears a prevailing code of self-censorship. Writers tend to stop at the gates to the death camp or at the door of the gas chamber or torture room, “as though a kind of imaginative closure in the face of horror made such scenes unrepresentable” (Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions* 53). There is also evidence, as seen in the writings of Levi and Kosinski, of a will to stop at the exterior form of the figure of terror, to deny reader access into the psyche of the architects or henchmen of genocide. As Coetzee asks: “How is the writer to represent the torturer? If he intends to avoid the clichés of spy fiction, to make the torturer neither a figure of satanic evil, nor an actor in a black comedy, nor a faceless functionary, nor a tragically divided man doing a job he does not believe in, what openings are left?” (“Dark Chamber” 364). In *The Painted Bird* the young protagonist’s description of an SS officer presents a child’s awe for the impenetrable, inhuman guise of power:

Never before had I seen such a striking uniform. At the proud peak of the cap glittered a death’s-head and crossbones, while lighteninglike signs embellished the collar. A red badge bearing the bold sign of the swastika cut across his sleeve. . . . His face was in the sunshine now, and it had a sheer and compelling beauty, the skin almost waxlike, with flaxen hair as smooth as a baby’s. Once before, in a church, I had seen such a delicate face. . . . His entire person seemed to have something utterly superhuman about it. Against the background of bland colours he projected an unfadable blackness. In a world of men with harrowed faces, with smashed eyes, bloody, bruised and disfigured limbs, among the fetid, broken human bodies he seemed an example of neat perfection that could not be sullied: the smooth, polished skin of his face, the bright golden hair showing under his peaked cap, his pure metal eyes. (112-13)

Despite the fact that the two Nazi soldiers encountered by Kosinski’s young narrator are kind to the boy, the disturbing correlation in this description of an SS officer between the swastika and the skin of a baby, the death’s-head and the sanctity of a church, serves to reject any negotiation of personality or humanity that could, even amidst the barbarity in a text such as this, repulse the reader and compromise the humanity of the witness character. Such reticence exemplifies a widespread fear that, by exploring the mind and motivations of the perpetrators, one runs the risk of placing the writer or the reader in a position of understanding or, worse, identifying with, such executors of cruelty. Just as the mute figure resists emotional or psychological

identification, so too the mind of the perpetrator remains closed to the reader.<sup>19</sup> In her discussion of *The Kommandant's Mistress*, Doerr describes the risks inherent in Szeman's allocation of equal narrative time to the Jewish girl, Rachel, and the camp commandant: "By 'climbing into the skin' of a Nazi, as Szeman does with her first-person narration by the *Kommandant*, one skirts the danger of not only understanding his actions logically, but also comprehending them morally, seeing him as a victim of Nazi ideology, and even perhaps accepting defensive rationalizations" (2003). Wiesel also addresses this subject when he describes his refusal to enter the minds of murderers:

My chief concern is with the victims. Why should I waste my time exposing myself to the thinking of the executioners? This is also what I believe about those who deny or downplay Auschwitz. I want to devote myself to the ideas and feelings of the victims. This is why I have never been a Nazi-hunter. Others are fascinated by evil. They ask what made Dr Mengele into Dr Mengele. Not I. My life is filled with tears and the pain of the victims. My field is: What rendered the victims mute when they met Dr Mengele, what made them cry out, and what drove them into isolation? (Schuster 86-87)

The fictional texts studied here have not "solved" the problem of articulating historical atrocity. They have not ignored the difficulty. Neither have they found a way to assimilate real experiences of human barbarity into the linear, subject-based form of the novel. Rather, they have incorporated the agreed unspeakability of certain human actions into their texts through the use of words that are not spoken and information that is not given. Clearly this reticence is an acknowledgement of the difficulty of finding right response to such atrocity, yet it is also a warning against too easy an interpretation of the Holocaust. The rift between word and meaning that occurred in the wake of the Holocaust suggests that an acknowledgement of – not an immediate remedy for – this disjunction is required. As Horowitz claims, "muteness signifies a radical interrogation of abstract concepts – whether religious or secular – that may falsely assert meaningfulness in face of the void" (31). And, as already recorded, Gavriel in *The Gates of the Forest* claims that, in times of war, "millions of men live under false names; there is a divorce between man and his name. Sometimes the name has had enough and goes away. Is that so hard to imagine?" (9) – a pertinent observation in the light of the many characters in this study who remain nameless or only partly named.

Patterson argues that Holocaust literature signifies the overcoming of a mute despair, "an assertion and affirmation of faith" following a challenge that is not specifically literary or even historical but existential, ontological and "fundamentally religious" (4). This viewpoint asserts silence as a harrowing godlessness, and

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<sup>19</sup> Hulme in *the bone people* does take this step in entering the mind of Joe, the man who violently abuses the young boy, Simon, yet who nevertheless is later rescued from his own inhumanity.

speech as a significant step back into the fold. In Wiesel's *Night* the protagonist is faced with his own silence before his God: "How could I say to Him: 'Blessed Art Thou, Eternal One, Master of the Universe, Who chose us from among the nations to be tortured day and night, to see our fathers, our mothers, end up in the crematorium?'" (74). Such abandonment is also evident in *The Gates of the Forest* when Gregor abandons his Hebrew name, Gavriel, both to hide his Jewish identity and to mark "God's abandonment of the Jews" (Horowitz 125-26). For Patterson, however, the Holocaust novel is:

not primarily an attempt to recount the details of a particular occurrence, to depict a reality that transcends the imagination or to describe a horror inaccessible to a limited language. It is, rather, an event and an endeavour to fetch the word from the silence of exile and restore it to its meaning; it is an attempt to resurrect the dead soul or self of the human being. (5)

But if the Holocaust novel "is the conflict between word and silence" (50), as Patterson claims, then the mute character stands conspicuously in the centre of this dichotomy, a physical reminder that humane meaning cannot be applied to a recent event of genocide, and that any religiosity associated with a return to speech is tempered by the despairing view of humanity to which they have been exposed. Like Lukács, Patterson reiterates the importance of dialogue in the novel form; indeed, he goes so far to say that "the resurrection or redemption of the soul that arises in the dialogic exchange between author and reader via character" (6) is an important aspect of the Holocaust novel. A mute character can be seen to fail in both completing this path to redemption through dialogue or in bringing "the living word out of exile" (Patterson 29). In the books studied here, meaning is *not* completely re-aligned to word. As Hoffman says, "The six years of the war had created a geological fissure in time and removed the world before to another era" (13).

In *The Kommandant's Mistress*, Rachel finally takes revenge on von Walther after he seeks her out after the war. She shoots him (unlike Hanna X in *The Other Side of Silence*, who also brings a gun to her confrontation with the man who raped her, Rachel does not have the evidence of a scarred or mutilated body to show as evidence; Rachel uses her gun, Hanna X does not), but only after he has begun to recite the words she had written about her experiences in the camp:

He kept talking: it was his language, but they were not his words. I knew the words that came out of his mouth. They were my words: they were spelled with my skin, my blood, my bones. I knew those words he was giving to me. They were the Kommandant's words, but they were forged with my skin, my blood, my bones. The Kommandant opened his mouth and *The Dead Bodies* poured out of him.

I readied the gun for firing: snap, click. (254)

Rachel's written record, argues Doerr, functions not only as a testimony to von Walther's cruel acts, but also "as a confession in which she reveals having used (survival) strategies often associated with women. They are silence and seduction" (2003). These words do not therefore represent the redemptive power of faith – they are the words of atrocity, and the speaker, the orchestrator of such atrocity, dies with this truth spilling out of his mouth.

Patterson regards silence as the opposite of self, an indifferent, non-human nothingness that replaces being. Throughout his study he refers to the silence of the word in exile as a palpable simulacrum of death, a meaningless state of meaninglessness, a "murdered voice" (34). In losing voice the character may well fall out of the familiar trope of interiority that defines the novel, and may well align him- or herself with the death of others, but as a different form of communication such speechlessness functions as an active portrayal of atrocity that certainly numbs selfhood but which also strengthens our understanding and knowledge of recent history. As he quotes Wiesel, "If I use words, it is not to change silence but to complete it" (Patterson 19) and the use of a mute character, as seen in his own work, provides a very literal completion of that silence.

Holocaust literature defies enclosure by the rules of both fiction and non-fiction. The degree of atrocity it seeks to address leaves it outside the norms of both literary and historical disciplines:

The distinction we made between a historical mode of representation entailing a pact of "fidelity to the real" on the one hand, and fictional representation in general on the other, where the pact is of a significantly different kind, is not sufficiently sensitive to account for the specific case of literature (or poetry or theatre . . . ) that takes as its subject the Holocaust. (Leak et al 9-10)

This is not to argue that the Holocaust was an aberrant human phenomenon that surpassed all other acts of atrocity. Human history has seen many examples of acts of atrocity and it would be demeaning to all involved to set up a scale of suffering. Indeed, the gradual incursion of the Holocaust into our tribal story via literature is an essential step in recognising it for what it was – a brutal enactment of racial hatred that was born out of a continuing propensity for violence.

There is undoubtedly a temptation to wish the Holocaust away out of our history books, out of our personal understanding – Semprún's character in *The Long Voyage* describes the pleasure it would be for him to witness the disintegration of the concentration camp where he was imprisoned for two years. But it remains the role of both critics and writers to continue to ask whether it is possible to successfully write or speak of the Holocaust. The answer is yes. While at odds with the humane and orderly endeavour that has been traditionally associated with the fictional narrative, while lacking the process of signification that we expect from literature, the creative exploration of the Holocaust is possible, indeed necessary. Yet, in allowing the reader to venture

those last few steps into human brutality alone, without the aid of an explanatory voice, the Holocaust is revealed to be an ongoing challenge to the aesthetic norms of traditional narrative. Its horror remains. Its seeming irrationality survives any moderating clarification. In the Holocaust alphabet, silence is a vital letter, the mute character representing in his or her speechlessness the distance between their experience and the reassuring logic of speech, while refusing still to acquiesce to the communal desire to look the other away.

## Conclusion

When George Steiner wrote of “the incompatibility between eloquence, the poet’s primary delight in speech, and the inhuman nature of political reality” (71), he was referring to a chaotic, post-World War II literary landscape in which language struggled to encompass the seemingly irrational experience of terror, violence and subjugation as seen during the events of the Holocaust. Even today, for the writer of fiction it is a landscape marred by staggering statistics, unbelievable images and contested reports, yet it is a landscape that an increasing number of writers are refusing to ignore.

Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi introduced his 1986 collection of essays, *The Drowned and the Saved*, with lines from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”:

Since then, at an uncertain hour,  
That agony returns,  
And till my ghastly tale is told  
This heart within me burns. (n. pag.)

Levi told his “ghastly tale” with scrupulous diligence. While he expressed repulsion at the idea that he had been purposefully “saved” from death in Auschwitz in an act of divine grace – “I might be alive in the place of another, at the expense of another; I might have usurped, that is, in fact, killed” (82) – he did feel an obligation to record the events as experienced by him and his fellow prisoners, the vast majority of whom did not survive. The very fact that he survived was proof for him that he was not a “true witness” (83), but the spare, unemotive language of his memoirs and essays have come to signify both the horror of the *univers concentrationnaire* that was Auschwitz as well as the caution required in any discussion of such material. In Levi’s writings grief is restrained, outrage strangely absent. There are few metaphors, no figures of speech that are not essential to the story he is telling. Rather, there is an air of determined attentiveness, as if he had to assume an almost exaggerated truthfulness in order to better believe himself the unbelievable world that he is describing.

All the writers included in this investigation show a similar vigilance towards their own chosen art form as they portray mainly real events of trauma for a readership that may well include actual victims of such or similar events. This vigilance is born out of recognition of the difficulties encountered by the writer, as much as concern for the reader confronted with accounts of appalling inhumanity, and the failure of traditional literary forms to



provide any lucid response to recent barbarity. In *Literature or Life* Semprún describes the struggle he faced in attempting to write his experiences of Buchenwald:

all my drafts begin before, of after, or around, but never in the camps. . . . And when I finally get inside, I'm blocked, and cannot write. Overwhelmed with anguish, I fall back into nothingness: I give up . . . only to begin again elsewhere, some other way. . . . (166).

Earlier he records a conversation had between two Buchenwald survivors shortly before leaving the camp:

"We were trying to figure out how we should talk about all this, so that people would understand us."

I nod: it's a good question. One of the right questions.

"That's not the problem," someone else exclaims immediately. "The real problem isn't talking about it, whatever the difficulties might be. It's hearing about it. . . . Will people want to hear our stories, even if they're told well?" (123)

Inexpressibility, says Wolosky, offers a view of language as "at best wanting, at worst profane, compared with the truth it would express" (*Language Mysticism* 1). But when traditional uses of language fail to encompass those events that lie "outside the narrative syntax of human communication, in the explicit domain of the bestial" (Steiner 189), is it not apt that the transgression of one of the writer's most fundamental techniques, that of giving voice to a character, and the transgression of one of society's most fundamental codes of conduct, that of conversation and information-sharing, have been employed, through the uncontested physicality of the mute character, to illustrate the social and personal fragmentation that results from acts of war and terror? One of the casualties of such a restriction on voice may well be the loss of autonomous representation by the character in question – as Worthington says in relation to Coetzee's *Friday*, the possibility of subjective freedom "inheres in the possession of a speaking voice and the exercising of a capacity for dialogic interaction with one's (potentially oppressive) interpreters" (255). Despite this, in negotiating the portrayal of terror in literature both the possession of a speaking voice and the ability to interact with others have, in the past half-century, been deliberately restricted in order to represent and recreate the limited freedom of the victim and the horrifying circumstances of their experiences. As Clendinnen writes in relation to the Holocaust:

It is reasonable to ask if we have ever known how to communicate the experience of deliberately inflicted violence in words, beyond comic-books "ughs" and "oofs". . . . But the inner experience? . . . The people incarcerated by the Nazis lived through a monotony of physical and psychological

assaults inflicted in conditions of complete helplessness, where their voices were neither heard nor heeded. Silence was enjoined upon them. It was after the experience of these coercive circumstances that “ordinary” individuals, rendered extraordinary only by what had been done to them and by their largely accidental survival of it, were confronted by the problem of communicating previously unimaginable experience by way of the written word. (31-32)

Langer also identifies the ethical obstacles to translating experienced trauma into literature: “[W]e need to believe that one *ought not* to be able to write about that defilement of human dignity, as if the act of writing would swell the trespass or soil the sanctity of the ordeal” (*Art from the Ashes* 4). Literary attention to such defilement does undermine the Enlightenment notion of an increasingly humane and civilised society, but complying with this reluctance to confront those acts or events that fall outside the accepted trajectory towards a more enlightened society – outside the socially decreed canon of Bernstein’s “tribal encyclopedia” or Alexander’s definition of collective trauma – risks relegating the experience of the victim to forgetfulness, ignorance or a despicable tryst of secrecy with the perpetrator of such acts.

Yet writers do write on such topics. Indeed, as Langer says, “fifty years after the havoc, we have such an abundance of texts that Holocaust literature has grown into a genre of its own, needing nether excuse nor vindication” (*Art from the Ashes* 4). Many of these accounts, however, incorporate new techniques of writing to negotiate the “ghastly tale[s]” (Coleridge n.pag.) of historical trauma. Broken images, fragmented forms, limited perspectives, scrambled chronologies and the self-conscious deliberation over the challenges posed by such material have all been enlisted to convey the impact of rape, war, slavery and genocide on the human mind. Indeed, the development of such postmodernist elements of literary representation that have come to mark the portrayal of terror or trauma can be seen as a result of the failure of traditional art forms to re-imagine these “unimaginable” experiences of the twentieth century. As Adorno argues, in a world of social fragmentation the artistic response must necessarily reflect such fragmentation in an attempt to evoke the chaotic meaninglessness of violence, while stopping short of the inappropriate assumption of the voice of the victim or an obscene sense of voyeurism.

Commenting on post-war Germany, Steiner writes: “Something immensely destructive has happened to [language]. It makes noise. It even communicates, but it makes no sense of communion” (117) and it is this inability to explain, to apply meaning, that resonates through this cast of unspeaking characters. Silence that hints at what cannot be expressed, says Hoffman, “can at least provide readers with a sense of the enormity of what has been left unsaid” (28) and it is this enormity which we witness – meaningless, unavoidable and uncontestable, it just *is*. In the accounts of domestic violence, rape, slavery, war or genocide studied here, the use of incomplete or circumscribed details of pain and terror and the surprisingly widely encountered presence of an unspeaking character serves to mimic the chaos of terror or trauma, of humanity at its most disordered, while

also refusing to be drawn into an explanation of meaning. If the novel is, as Lukács, claims, “the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God”, a validation of the “mature man’s knowledge that meaning can never quite penetrate reality” (88), then the character who does not speak serves as an inarguable manifestation of that divine abandonment, physical proof of the human capacity for violence that falls far beyond society’s assumptions of itself as orderly, self-controlled and just. In pointing to a certain beyondness in the history of human experience the silence of the victim of, or witness to, trauma thus signifies the breachability of what society deems to be the bounds of acceptable human behaviour. Beyond these boundaries lies not the threat of divine retribution or even, at times, societal condemnation. Rather there lies the constant threat of the human capacity for cruelty as seen through the evidence of those who have gone beyond, who have, in Levi’s words, “touched bottom” or, in Brink’s terminology, reached the “other side of silence”, to a point that we are all, perhaps, capable of reaching.

Stripped of the explanatory voice of the subjective experience, these mute figures are denied the identity derived from a collective confrontation and endorsement of past events with which they have been implicated. For as long as these characters remain mute, they remain divorced from the reassuring communality of other characters. In this regard, these unspeaking figures share the isolation and speechless contemplation of the reader – “the man who reads alone in a room with his mouth closed” (Steiner 415-16) – as they issue their bleak invitation to enter into their potentially stigmatising experiences, just as Semprún’s character in *The Long Voyage* sought to share his experience of isolated and isolating subjugation with the two terrified nurses. As Scarry says, “Alarmed and dismayed by his or her own failure of language, the person in pain might find it reassuring to learn that even the artist – whose life work and everyday habit are to refine and extend the reflexes of speech – ordinarily falls silent before pain” (10). Certainly, the use of restricted speech, through the presence of a mute victim of historical trauma, can be seen as an act of observance of such pain.

In acknowledging the human capacity for extreme violence, while also noting the extent to which we continue to be horrified by such a capacity, these writers point not only to the difficulty of incorporating such events into the encyclopedic canon of literature but also to the necessity of addressing material that must lie beyond the human lexicon of acceptable behaviour. As Celan said in his acceptance speech for the Bremen Prize for German Literature in 1958, language “had to go through its own answerlessness, its dreadful silence, go through the thousand darknesses of deadly speech. It went through it and gave no words for what had happened; but it went through these events. Went through and was allowed to come to light again” (*Selected Poems and Prose* 395). Certainly, to respond to the “thousand darknesses” with an explanation based on divinity, linguistic failure or profound ineffability misses the point. Such events do come – already have come – back into the light but, in displaying such events (and without the voice of the victim these events tend to be displayed rather than explained) through silence these novels acknowledge the point at which society defines its own reasonableness, its own necessary demarcations of morality. Such a point must have a beyondness, signifying neither divine being nor primordial chaos nor complete indescribability. Silence that hints at what cannot be expressed can at

least “provide readers with a sense of the enormity of what has been left unsaid” (Kokkola 28). Indeed, a complete lack of response – a total silence – is the worst offence. It recalls the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide of hundreds of thousands of minority Tutsis in 1994, in which all material evidence – the axes, machetes, human bones as well as photos – was completely erased. As Hoffman says, “Perhaps remembering the ideas is the very opposite of violence – a gratuitous retrieval of meaning from oblivion” and while I dispute the term “meaning” in relation to acts of atrocity, certainly the greatest ally to gratuitous violence is complete silence.

A book that contains the “informational gaps” typified by a character that does not speak, says Kokkola, can be more informative on an emotional level than a book which attempts to provide all relevant background. “But for this to happen, the reader must become aware of the silence. The text must engage in a dialogue with silence” (25). In responding to a character that does not speak the reader clearly engages with silence – the silence of reading, the silence of the mute character, and the communal silence surrounding certain demeaning or shaming acts of terror. In lieu of conversation, dialogue and verbal explanation we are left instead with a series of images indicative of the irreconcilability of trauma with traditional social discourse. So we see Hanna trudging across the Namibian desert, Friday swirling in a scarlet robe in a dank and soulless London, Birdy crouching on the floor of his walled nest, Norah sitting on a Toronto footpath, Simon screaming wordlessly into his fragile beach constructions, Armstrong busking in the dim light of the Underground and Marquand abandoned in his hospital wheelchair on the hospital grounds. In these frozen pictures of terror, we are presented with trauma, victimhood, physical and psychological pain unmediated by the reassuring norms of character exploration implicit in the explanatory voice, the development of plot, or aesthetics. According to William Rollins, in his discussion of *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* by Daniel Jonah Goldhagen (1996), photographs interrupt the narrative flow of history – they “freeze it or throw undue emphasis on the psychology of the moment. . . . [A] photograph of a violent act shows only a fraction of a person’s life under the most extreme and, for the victim, most demeaning conditions” (259-60), while in narratives, on the other hand, “the spectacle of agony is limited by the onrushing flow of events” (260). In their silence, these characters similarly freeze a single moment of experience, an event or an insight that is not swept away by the “onrushing flow of events”; indeed their silence can be seen as an echo of that one instance of witnessing, of suddenly *knowing*.

Of course, the mute characters incorporated in the texts studied here represent many degrees of silence. The reader has access to the thoughts of Ritie in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Hanna X in *The Other Side of Silence*, Beer in *Fugitive Pieces* and Marquand in *Islands of Silence*. He or she can read the notes left by Kapostach in King’s *The Ha-Ha*, Prior in Barker’s *Regeneration*, Melinda in Anderson’s *Speak*, the grandfather in Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and Simon in *the bone people*. He or she can benefit from hindsight as characters such as Armstrong in *Anthem*, Pallas in *Paradise* and Norah in *Unless* retrieve their voices. In other instances the reader is forced to rely entirely on the limited accounts of the other characters,

those who have no access to the thoughts and experiences of these unspeaking figures, as seen in Coetzee's *Foe* and Wharton's *Birdy*. In each of these examples, however, the speechlessness of the character functions as a telling portrayal of a terror that is more akin to the universal applicability of mythology or imagery. As Karen Armstrong notes:

A myth was an event which, in some sense, had happened once, but which also happened all the time. Because of our strictly chronological view of history, we have no word for such an occurrence, but mythology is an art form that points beyond history to what is timeless in human existence, helping us to get beyond the chaotic flux of random events. (7)

It is thus myth, she argues, that transfigures “our fragmented, tragic world” (8), and certainly it may be through the near mythic appearance of this cast of mute figures that we may find a more evocative representation of historic barbarity than that offered by the characters whose experience of such barbarity is fully integrated into the communal discourse of the novel through the unconstrained access by the author.

Language has not failed this unspeaking cast. As the author Foe says in Coetzee's book, “Speech is but a means through which the word may be uttered, it is not the word itself” (143). Rather, the events experienced by these characters occupy a frozen core which is framed by language, a core or silence that effectively illuminates the difficulty of both conveying and eliciting real empathy for extreme pain without resorting to cheap graphics or overly sensational shock tactics, both of which fail to bring the experiences of the victim into the accepted lexicon of human behaviour. Unless it disappears altogether from collective memory, that core will inevitably be explored – historical trauma does eventually lose the terrifying vividness that renders contemporary violence so difficult to encapsulate in narrative form, and in this regard a self-conscious silence by way of a character that does not speak can be seen as a prolonged preparation for the return or development of Steiner's “right speech”.

In discussing the “commemorative power of a monument” Crapanzano says that, within the modern or postmodern context, “negative monuments at least end up memorializing not only the losses they seek to commemorate but their inability to do so. In this respect, they become self-referential. . . . [it may be that] the commemorative power of a monument comes not through immediate communion but through the absence of communion – through singularity, loneliness, and an overwrought sense of one's personal response that defies, as it participates in, the collective (170-71). In each of these texts the mute characters, these human monuments to trauma, reveal their lack of communality, the extremity of their experiences and, perhaps, the humanity of those writers who approach such subject matter with such caution.

Some Holocaust testimonies, writes Langer, “stun us into disbelief and even denial, for they speak of deeds that need to be eased into our imagination with less naked force” (*Art from the Ashes* 11). The physical presence of the unspeaking characters in these books serve to do just that – without taking us into the dangerous

quagmire of overt confrontation of murder or abuse, these characters fulfill Langer's requirement for an indirect access to the imagination of historical trauma, refusing to jeopardise the truth through the silence of inattention yet acknowledging our collectively determined boundaries that protect the dignity of both the reader and the subject in relation to historic acts of atrocity. With this approach these writers continue to focus on the wider issues addressed in each of these books – that is, the necessity not to neglect unpalatable truths concerning the human capacity for violence in one of the most important means of collective communication, that of literature.

“There's nothing special about such miseries,” Semprún writes:

In one form or another, we've described them all. They figure in all accounts by former deportees, whether written in the white heat of immediate testimony – which runs out of breath and sometimes bogs down in the scrupulous reconstruction of a past that is hardly believable, positively unimaginable – or much later, with the perspective of the passage of time, in the endless attempt to explain an experience receding into the past, in which certain contours grow nevertheless more and more distinct and certain areas gleam with a new light amid the mists of oblivion. (*Literature or Life* 235)

Indeed, in defying those voices that argue against a creative exploration of historical atrocity – and there are many, as seen in those critics denouncing the use of the Holocaust as a subject for fiction – these writers deprive what are considered to be the extremities of history. In writing about the atrocities of two world wars, the American and Sri Lankan civil wars, slavery and the genocides in Namibia and Nazi Germany, these writers draw such events back into our collective imagination, so denying their status as abnormal diversions from humanity's steady path towards human enlightenment. As David Carroll writes in his introduction to Jean-François Lyotard's *Heidegger and "the jews"* (1990), in terms of the Holocaust:

The command/plea “Let's not talk about that” is obviously a way of beginning to talk about “that.” At the very least, it is one of the ways of indicating the impossibility of talking about “that.” For Lyotard, the impossibility of talking about “that” is a sign that critical thought is obliged to talk about it, writing obliged to write about it – but not directly or in a representational mode. (xi)

In these texts it is the human body, before language, that serves as evidence of “that” – of human behaviour that denigrates, hurts and destroys human lives and social self-perception. The unexpectedly large cast of mute characters carries the weight of human atrocity on their shoulders; they hold in their bodies the memories and the scars of that unbridgeable chasm between knowledge of the human capacity for brutality and ignorance. They do not fit the novel form just as they do not fit a society which fears their stories. They are

shamed by what they know, shunned because of the stories inscribed on their bodies. It is their very inability to transfer their painful history through speech that drives the characters in these works, and that ensures that these “ghastly” histories are not denied entry into our collective imagination.

For some, these experiences are short-lived – in naming her aggressor Melinda in *Speak* is returned to the collective, as is Prior in *Regeneration* and the nameless boy in *The Painted Bird* (although the question remains whether their re-entry into communality will ever be complete, once they have experienced the degradation of the victim). For others, such as Friday in *Foe*, such singularity and loneliness are given no hope of reprieve. At the conclusion of this very literary, speech-based narrative his outpouring of signs is visible but incomprehensible. Voice has thus proved to be less integrated into contemporary experience than perhaps previously thought – there is a provisionality that has adhered to our assumptions of the relationship between experience, language and meaning. But the world of words has not shrunk, as Steiner claims (43); indeed, it has grown to encompass silence and the validity of the body to portray that which may be lost, diluted, shunned or disbelieved when conveyed through direct articulation.

In endeavouring to portray the trauma of such tales each of these writers has to both confront the impossibility of fulfilling the expectations of the edifying role of the novel and negotiate the risks of repelling the reader or trivialising the experience of the victim. The use of a character that does not speak emerges as an increasingly common response to these challenges, indicating the widespread wariness concerning the rights and means of fiction writers to speak on behalf of another’s traumatic experience, while refusing too to allow such subjects to fall from our collective imagination altogether. In *Foe* the eponymous author says, “In every story there is a silence, some sight concealed, some word unspoken, I believe. Till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story” (141). In their cautious approach to trauma these writers focus on this heart, this “sight concealed”, in much the same way that the artist Ananda secretly remodels the head of the murdered civilian in Sri Lanka in *Anil’s Ghost*, Rita in *Unless* scrawls her pain on an anonymous graffiti board and the narrator in Semprún’s *The Long Voyage* farewells a comrade due for execution – carefully, often surreptitiously, marking each minute detail as a guard against wholesale confrontation with terror. Foe’s “heart of the story” thus remains unviolated. It lives so it may appall – as it must appall – future generations.

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